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**Imagining inclusive schooling:**  
**An ethnographic inquiry into disabled children's**  
**learning and participation in regular schools in Shanghai**

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## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by me based on research that I conducted independently. It contains no content that has been submitted before for any other academic degree or professional qualification.





## Abstract

In Mainland China, a national education policy called ‘Learning in Regular Classrooms’ (LRC) has been implemented for over 25 years to support the inclusion of disabled children in regular schools. Although the LRC policy framework has been gradually adapted in response to the global movement for inclusive education, little is known about what is happening in classrooms and schools. In particular, disabled children’s views and experiences of their school lives remain unknown.

Drawing on perspectives from inclusive education, pupil voice, disability studies and childhood studies, this research is driven by a theoretical stance that positions disabled children as active and competent social actors whose voices should be valued and heard. This exploratory inquiry adopted an ethnographic approach. I conducted the fieldwork in 4 state primary schools in Shanghai, with 11 disabled children (designated as LRC pupils and labelled as having Learning Difficulties), 10 class teachers and 3 resource teachers. The *Framework for Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) was used to inform data collection and analysis. Multiple methods were utilised including participant observation, interviews and participatory activities. Rich, in-depth and contextual data were collected and thematically analysed.

This research highlights several key findings. First, the necessity of listening to pupil voice is reaffirmed. Children’s views of schooling revealed hidden knowledge that had been unknown to teachers. The child participants were sensitive, observant and reflective, exercising their agency to negotiate the circumstances in which they were living. They offered informative comments on school practice and shared aspirations for improvement.

Second, it was found that the meaning of inclusive education failed to be addressed in everyday schooling process, although there had been rhetorical change in LRC policy, and its implementation helped to secure disabled children’s access to regular schools. Disabled children were still facing forms of marginalisation and exclusion, such as limited participation in decision-making, restricted opportunities to access extra-curricular activities and spaces, lack of support for academic learning, and

negative experiences of bullying from peers. The existing special educational provision such as the 'resource classroom' was found to interrupt children's sense of togetherness and generate negative labelling effects for them.

Third, facilitators of and barriers to disabled children's learning and participation were identified. The exclusionary process affecting disabled children was strongly fortified by the introduction of special educational thinking and practice, which not only marked out these children as incompetent and in need of protection, but also underrated the existing inclusive practice in regular classrooms. The process was further reinforced by the charitable model of disability in Confucian society and the prevailing competitive and performative school culture. Nevertheless, teachers could play important roles in negotiating all pupils' learning and participation. Among the insights gained into teachers' practice, a connection between teachers' attentiveness to children's worlds and their demonstration of inclusive practice was noticed, on the basis of which I discussed the implications of pupil voice for developing inclusive practice, and explored a working model for moving towards inclusive education in China with pupil voice as a core starting point.

In China, there is still a long way to go before realising all children's learning and participation. This research calls for a paradigm shift within the country to encourage new ways of thinking and researching, in which children must be seen as essential partners in the process of transforming and imagining possibilities for inclusive education.

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## Table of contents

<b>List of figures, tables and illustrations</b> .....	xv
<b>Abbreviations</b> .....	xvii
<b>Glossary of Chinese terms</b> .....	xix
<b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b> .....	1
1.1 Prelude .....	1
1.2 Rationale for the research .....	4
1.3 Structure of the thesis.....	11

### Section one: Background literature

<b>Chapter 2 Disabled children in Chinese education</b> .....	15
2.1 Introduction.....	15
2.2 Chinese education system – characteristics and reforms .....	15
2.3 Educational provision for disabled children .....	21
2.3.1 Disability in China .....	21
2.3.2 The development of special education.....	24
2.3.3 Integrating disabled children in regular education.....	29
2.3.3.1 The policy context.....	29
2.3.3.2 Issues and challenges .....	32
2.3.3.3 The implementation of LRC .....	38
2.4 Locating Shanghai.....	43
2.5 Summary .....	46
<b>Chapter 3 Inclusive education and pupil voice</b> .....	49
3.1 Introduction.....	49
3.2 ‘Unpacking’ inclusive education .....	49
3.2.1 Inclusion concerning all or some? .....	52
3.2.2 The continuity of exclusion.....	54
3.2.3 Differences, dilemmas and tensions.....	56

3.2.4 Enacting inclusion in practice .....	60
3.2.5 Inclusive education in international contexts .....	64
3.3 Positioning pupil voice.....	67
3.3.1 Children as being and becoming.....	68
3.3.2 Concepts and troubles of pupil voice .....	70
3.3.3 Cultural notes: Chinese views of childhood .....	73
3.4 Linking pupil voice with inclusive education .....	75
3.4.1 Potential implications for inclusive practice .....	76
3.4.2 Pupils' perspectives in inclusive education research .....	79
3.4.3 Recognising teachers' roles .....	85
3.5 Research questions .....	87
3.6 Summary .....	89

## **Section two: Methodology and methods**

<b>Chapter 4 Methodology and research design.....</b>	<b>91</b>
4.1 Introduction.....	91
4.2 Methodological considerations .....	93
4.2.1 Social and transformative constructivism .....	93
4.2.2 Researching with children.....	95
4.2.2.1 Research relations .....	95
4.2.2.2 Effective communication .....	98
4.2.2.3 Suitable methods for children .....	98
4.2.2.4 Researching with disabled children .....	101
4.3 Research design.....	105
4.3.1 Framework for Participation as a research tool .....	111
4.3.2 Adopting the ethnographic approach .....	114
4.3.3 Reflexivity and researcher identity .....	116
4.3.4 Research ethics.....	124

4.3.4.1 Informed consent.....	125
4.3.4.2 Confidentiality and anonymity.....	127
4.3.4.3 Ethics in the field .....	128
4.3.5 Trustworthiness .....	130
4.4 Summary .....	132
<b>Chapter 5 Methods .....</b>	<b>135</b>
5.1 Introduction.....	135
5.2 Sampling .....	135
5.3 Fieldwork .....	138
5.3.1 Participant observation.....	138
5.3.2 Participatory activities with children .....	141
5.3.3 Interviews with teachers.....	145
5.4 Analysing data.....	147
5.4.1 Data analysis as a social practice .....	147
5.4.2 Analytical process during data collection .....	150
5.4.3 Data organisation .....	151
5.4.4 Thematic analysis.....	154
5.5 Summary .....	159

### **Section three: Making sense of the data**

<b>Chapter 6 Findings and interpretations .....</b>	<b>161</b>
6.1 Introduction.....	161
6.2 Participation and access .....	162
6.2.1 Joining the school and the class .....	163
6.2.2 Staying in the school and the class.....	165
6.2.3 Accessing the curriculum.....	168
6.2.4 Accessing spaces and places .....	179
6.3 Participation and collaboration .....	183



6.3.1 Pupils learning with peers .....	183
6.3.2 Teachers learning with and from pupils.....	188
6.3.3 Teachers working with each other .....	191
6.3.4 Teachers working with communities .....	194
6.4 Participation and achievement .....	196
6.4.1 Children's learning.....	196
6.4.2 The performative school culture .....	203
6.4.3 Teachers' inclusive practices .....	208
6.5 Participation and diversity .....	212
6.5.1 Acceptance and recognition of students by students .....	213
6.5.2 Acceptance and recognition of students by staff .....	224
6.5.3 Acceptance and recognition of staff by staff .....	230
6.6 Summary .....	231
<b>Chapter 7 Discussion .....</b>	<b>233</b>
7.1 Introduction.....	233
7.2 Learning from children .....	235
7.2.1 Understanding children's worlds .....	236
7.2.2 Participation and exclusion .....	238
7.2.3 From sameness to difference.....	243
7.3 Learning from teachers .....	246
7.3.1 Reinforcing exclusion and negotiating inclusion.....	246
7.3.2 Revisiting pupil voice and inclusive practice .....	249
7.4 Imagining inclusive schooling in China.....	253
7.5 Summary .....	259
<b>Chapter 8 Conclusion .....</b>	<b>261</b>
8.1 Introduction.....	261
8.2 Summary of the main findings and discussions.....	262
8.3 Limitations of the study .....	267

8.4 Contributions to knowledge .....	268
8.5 Implications for future research, policy and practice.....	273
8.6 Epilogue .....	276
<b>References</b> .....	277
<b>Appendices</b> .....	305
Appendix-A: Statistics of Chinese special education system.....	305
Appendix-B: Summary of methods for researching children’s views.....	306
Appendix-C: Pilot study .....	308
Appendix-D: Informed consent letters .....	310
Appendix-E: Introduction to participating schools.....	318
Appendix-F: Overview of participants .....	320
Appendix-G: Interview guidelines.....	328



## **List of figures, tables and illustrations**

### **Figures**

Figure 4.1 The iterative research process .....	108
Figure 4.2 The procedure of the fieldwork .....	110
Figure 4.3 The process of analysing data .....	110
Figure 4.4 The linear process of gaining informed consent .....	126
Figure 5.1 Photo-elicitation interviews with children .....	144
Figure 5.2 Symbol signs .....	145
Figure 6.1 The ‘playful’ resource classroom .....	173
Figure 6.2 Ready for inspection .....	174
Figure 6.3 Armbands for student cadres .....	178
Figure 6.4 Missing the garden .....	181
Figure 7.1 The working model for inclusive education in China .....	259

### **Tables**

Table 2.1 Education system of China .....	17
Table 4.1 The research tool .....	113
Table 4.2 Complexity of researcher identity .....	119
Table 5.1 Basic information about the child participants .....	137
Table 5.2 Basic information about the teacher participants .....	138
Table 6.1 The number of friends nominated by children .....	214
Table 7.1 Paradigm shifting towards inclusive education in China .....	255

### **Illustrations**

Illustration 1 Denied access to learning tools .....	170
Illustration 2 Light up a little bulb .....	188
Illustration 3 A Liar .....	193
Illustration 4 Punishing the parents .....	196
Illustration 5 Going to the dream school .....	198
Illustration 6 The least competent pupil .....	202

Illustration 7 Disengaged from classroom learning .....	204
Illustration 8 Just moody .....	207
Illustration 9 Hard to find a group buddy .....	215
Illustration 10 Playing with friends .....	216
Illustration 11 Bullying in group work .....	218
Illustration 12 The portrait of Mr Pacifier .....	219
Illustration 13 The pig .....	220
Illustration 14 Losing the game .....	221
Illustration 15 Drink the water .....	227

## **Abbreviations**

ADHD	- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
CAQDAS	- Computer-assisted qualitative data-analysis software
CDPF	- China Disabled Person's Federation
CNC-UNESCO	- Chinese National Commission for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
CPCCC	- Communist Party of China Central Committee
CPG	- Central People's Government
CRPD	- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DfE	- Department for Education (UK)
DSM	- Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders
DoH	- Department of Health (UK)
GAC	- Government Administrative Council
ICF	- International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health
ICIDH	- International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities, and Handicaps
ICT	- Information and Communications Technology
IEP	- Individual Educational Plan
IOSC	- Information Office of State Council
LEA	- Local Educational Authority
LPPD	- Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities
LRC	- Learning in Regular Classrooms
MoCA	- Ministry of Civil Affairs
MoE	- Ministry of Education
NBSC	- National Bureau of Statistics of China
NCS	- National Committee of Standardisation
NPC	- National People's Congress
NPCSC	- National People's Congress Standing Committee
OECD	- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PE - Physical Education

PISA - Programme for International Student Assessment

PRC - People's Republic of China

SC - State Council

SCSC - State Council Standing Committee

SEGC - Special Education Guidance Centre

SEN - Special Educational Needs

ShBS - Shanghai Bureau of Statistics

ShCoE - Shanghai Committee of Education

UN - United Nations

UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

UNICEF - United Nations Children's Fund

WB - World Bank

WHO - World Health Organisation

## **Glossary of Chinese terms**

*Banjiti* - Class community

*Canfei* - Disabled and useless

*Canji* - Disabled with impairments

*Canzhang* - Disabled with barriers

*Ertong* - Children

*Daojianghu* - Deceiving

*Gaokao* - National University Entrance Examination

*Hukou* - Household registration

*Hupenggouyou* - Evil friends

*Laobaixing* - The common people

*Liushou Ertong* - Children of migrant workers who are left behind in hometown

*Mozhe Shitou Guohe* - Trial-and-error

*Jiaoshi* - Teachers

*Jiaoyan* - Lesson study

*Junheng Jiaoyu* - Balanced education

*Painaodai* - Come up with a careless idea

*Pinyin* - Phonetic system for Mandarin

*Pute Ronghe* - ‘Regular and special inclusion’

*Quanmianfazhan* - Full development

*Quanna* - All in

*Ronghe* - Inclusion

*Suibanjiudu* - ‘Learning in Regular Classrooms’

*Suzhi Jiaoyu* - Quality education

*Wailaimei* - Women from outside Shanghai

*Xiao* - Filial piety

*Xiao Laoshi* - Little teacher

*Xuesheng Ganbu* - Student cadres (leaders)



*Xuezuoren* - Learning about how to be a person

*Yincaishijiao* - To teach based on a student's ability

*Yitihua* - Integration

*Yijiaojiehe* - A combination of medicine and education

*Youjiaowulei* - An education for every person regardless of difference

*Yukuai Jiaoyu* - Happy education

*Zhiri* - Daily duty

*Zhongdian Xuexiao* - 'Key' schools

# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Prelude

In recent years, curiosity about the Chinese education system has accumulated internationally because of its capacity to provide human resources for the country's rapid economic development. Notably, the high performance of pupils from Shanghai in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) sparked enthusiasm for analysing the reasons behind such results (e.g. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2010; Tan, 2013), while a discourse shifting towards 'learning from the East' (Sellar & Lingard, 2013) has been seen. Nevertheless, much less attention is given to examining whether such a high-performing education system is at the same time inclusive and equitable for all children, especially those who are categorised as disabled.

Disability has been widely recognised as a complex issue of development and human rights, and it is estimated that 15% of the global population are living with disabling conditions (World Health Organisation [WHO] & World Bank [WB], 2011). The implementation of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) has effectively established the global agenda of enhancing the wellbeing of disabled people and their rights of participation in social, political, economic and cultural realms (United Nations [UN], 2006).

In education, disability is one of the most potent factors in marginalisation (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2010). It has long been an issue that disabled people are prone to poor outcomes in education compared to non-disabled peers (Johnson & Kossykh, 2008). Recognising education as a fundamental right for every child, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994) and the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000), along with CRPD (UN, 2006), have together powerfully advocated for equal access to quality educational provision for disabled children, especially in mainstream settings. The notion of inclusive education, which entails explicit advocacy and the aspiration to remove barriers and promote all children's learning and participation (Ainscow, 2005; Arties & Dyson, 2005; Barton, 2003), has thus travelled rapidly

across borders and jurisdictions. Globally, it has seen the formation of a common theme of promoting inclusive education, and many countries have implemented policies or strategies to address its agenda (Ainscow, 2015; Vargas- Barón, 2014). However, in spite of the progress made, it certainly should not be ignored that, in many places, disabled children are still either receiving no formal schooling or are mostly enrolled in segregated institutions. Even in countries where the right of disabled children to access regular schools has already been granted, research suggests that discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion may continue to take place. The struggle for equality, equity and justice for disabled children's education is undeniably an on-going issue.

China is among the first to have endorsed the Salamanca Statement in 1994. Like many other countries, it has a long history of segregating disabled children in special schools and institutions since the Communist Party of China brought political unity to the mainland in 1949. The massive mainstreaming of disabled children into regular schools started in the late 1980s during the expansion of compulsory education in the period of Reform and Opening-up, under the implementation of a national strategy called 'Learning in Regular Classrooms' (LRC, *Suibanjiudu*). Over the past two decades, LRC has been gradually framed into a Chinese education policy to support the inclusion of disabled children in education at compulsory level.

Looking back at my own educational experience in China (I started at primary school in 1992 and finished senior secondary in 2001, in a small city in the Northeast region), I recall that the presence of disabled peers was scarce. I remembered well a girl in primary school who was living in the same neighbourhood; sometimes we walked home together after school or played badminton at weekends. However, she was often teased by other children for being 'slow' in learning, which made her feel sad. The family moved away and I heard that she was not admitted into secondary school, when the selection of schools and classes became competitive, given the strong pressure of the National University Entrance Exam (*Gaokao*). In junior secondary, all pupils had to stay at school until 10 pm every weekday to finish homework. In senior secondary, only Sunday afternoon was left as free time. Summer and winter holidays were filled with extra tutoring. Every year, pupils were

allocated into different classes based solely on the ranking of their exam results. Friendships among children were fragmented and aspirations were shattered for those who were allocated into 'lower' streams. In such a highly competitive system, there was little space for pupils who faced challenges or difficulties in their learning.

Several years later, after completing my degree in psychology, I was enrolled in a Master's programme in special education due to my interest in understanding 'non-typical' children's development. The dominant practice in the discipline inevitably entailed a process of labelling some children as different or disabled based on where they stood in the 'bell curve distribution' by comparison with others, and devising interventions to remedy these 'deficits' and normalise children as much as possible.

At that time, with the intention of finding out more about disabled people and supporting their real lives, I frequented special schools and community centres as a volunteer teacher. The daily experience of encountering the students strongly challenged the knowledge and perspectives that I was familiar with, which tended to pathologise and alienate them. The rewarding relationships with the students, and the mistreatment that I witnessed in segregated institutions, made me question why disabled children had to be marginalised and excluded, without equal opportunities to learn and participate. What could be done to make things better?

This unsettling experience led me to the notion of inclusive education, which was described in the coursework as a progressive western<sup>1</sup> practice and perceived as less relevant to Chinese special educators, who were mostly concerned about provision in special schools. The available empirical research on inclusive education for disabled children in China is extremely limited. In particular, the voices of disabled children themselves expressing their views on schooling are largely missing. What is often heard from teachers, parents, academics and media regarding disabled children's circumstances in regular schools suggests a disheartening situation. These children tend to be left 'drifting' in regular schools, exposed to poor-quality teaching and

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, the notion of 'the West' is used only to broadly imply the differences between Asian countries and 'western' countries in culture and values. Although the West-East dichotomy is surely problematic, in some contexts it is more suitable than other notions like North-South or Developed-Developing, which instead stress a political and socio-economic divide. Also, today people in China still usually use 'the West' to refer to countries that have roots in European civilisation.

even neglect (Wang, 2009). They could be excluded from schools as a result of pressure from other children's parents. Regular schools' resistance to accepting disabled children can be seen from existing surveys of teachers' attitudes (e.g. Deng & Zhu, 2007; Ma & Tan, 2010). The general lack of confidence in regular schools to deal with the challenges involved in including disabled children could be used to further justify the claim that they should only be educated elsewhere, such as in special schools.

Because inclusive education in the context of China was a vast blank area, the immediate research interest for me was to gain a better understanding of how inclusive education is implemented on the ground level: What is school life like for disabled children who are studying in regular schools? Are they learning and participating like other children? What could be the facilitators of and barriers to their inclusion? Therefore, I intend to use this research as a humble starting point to illuminate the issue, by promoting a debate and discussion about the implementation of inclusive education in China. Implications for current policy and practice should be gained; most particularly, this research aims to shed light on relevant issues or topics that could inform future research of other scholars besides myself.

## 1.2 Rationale for the research

This explorative research adopts an ethnographic approach to explore the current status of disabled children's learning and participation in regular schools in Shanghai by listening to a group of disabled children and their teachers' views and experiences. Since every research is situated in its specific context underpinned by particular theoretical frameworks, it is important to illustrate the rationale for the research, set out its scope and define how certain terms are understood and used.

Being used extensively in policy-making and practice development, the notion of inclusive education is seen to have been adopted and interpreted to mean different agendas, strategies, approaches and models of provision (Ainscow, Booth & Dyson, 2006; Barton, 1997; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Kozleski, Artiles & Waitoller, 2011; Lindsay, 2003; Norwich, 2013; Slee, 2011). In China, it also lacks a consistent and clear definition of the term. For example, in the national report submitted to

UNESCO at the 48th International Conference on Education, it was stated that ‘special education is an important part of inclusive education’ (Ministry of Education [MoE] & Chinese National Commission for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [CNC-UNESCO], 2008), a statement whereby segregated provision, strangely, could be seen as contributing to an inclusive system. Later in the draft of *Regulation of Education for Disabled People (revised)*, ‘inclusive education’ was used to mean provision in regular schools (MoE, 2013). Although it indicated that disabled children should be educated in regular settings, it seemed to adopt an ‘anything-goes’ stance by overlooking the quality of education for these children. These ways of conceptualising inclusive education are not satisfying.

Therefore, I address a much-needed distinction between the notions of special education and inclusive education. Although the entwined historical relation between the two is undeniable, inclusive education should not be construed as a new form of special education: it concerns radical reform of the general education system (Lipsky & Gartner, 2000; Vislie, 2003). The problematic implementation and conceptualisation of inclusive education should not be used to challenge its principle (Slee, 2011).

For me, inclusive education is about every child’s equal chance to enjoy high quality education in local neighbourhood schools. It rejects any form of segregation such as special schools/classrooms and grants children the right to learn together regardless of their individual differences. It means education in which opportunities for all children to learn and participate in a school community would be promoted and optimised, whilst the barriers that cause children to experience marginalisation and exclusion would be minimised and eliminated. In this research, I deliberately use ‘learning and participation’ to stress that inclusive education creates holistic experiences for children, rather than ‘learning without participation’ or ‘participation without learning’. It is also used more frequently than ‘inclusion’, first to differentiate the approach from a scenario of ‘social acceptance without achievement in learning’; because the failure to provide effective support to enhance children’s learning, enrich their schooling experiences and equip them with knowledge and skills can only impede their further participation in education and society. Second,

the term ‘participation’ gives rise to recognition of children’s roles through which they actively take part, rather than passively waiting to be included (Black-Hawkins, 2010). Booth’s definition of participation constitutes as a necessary starting point: ‘Participation in education involves going beyond access. It implies learning alongside others and collaborating with them in shared lessons. It involves active engagement with what is learnt and taught, and having a say in how education is experienced. But participation also involves being recognised for oneself and being accepted for oneself. I participate with you, when you recognise me as a person like yourself, and accept me for who I am’ (Booth, 2002, as cited in Black-Hawkins, Florian & Rouse, 2007: 46).

This research examines how disabled children’s learning and participation is facilitated or hindered in micro schooling processes in regular schools. Although I acknowledge the relevance of sociological analysis of the macro process that reinforces the exclusion of certain groups of learners through a discourse of othering (Allan, 2010; Barton, 1997; Greenstein, 2016; Slee, 2011; Tomlinson, 1982), I am more interested in how the meaning of inclusion is enacted in practice (Florian, 2008), the intention being to seek and validate the possibilities for realising the ideal of inclusive education (Dyson, 2000; Seale & Nind, 2010), even in a schooling context with structural barriers such as restricted supports, large class size, insufficient resources and limited training for teachers. It is worth noting that educational practice for inclusion is not seen as a purely technical issue but is inherently value-laden (Reynolds, 2001), because it involves limitless negotiation and decision-making over *who* gets *what* education *how* and *where*.

I reject a medical model of disability which pathologises disabled children and constructs their differences as deficits that constitute impediments to or difficulties in education. The term ‘disabled children’ is used because I recognise that disability is socially constructed (Oliver, 1990) and in this sense, these children could be ‘disabled’ by barriers such as inadequate supports or discrimination. The term itself is also consistent with the equivalent Chinese term ‘*Canji Ertong*’, in which ‘*Canji*’ (disability) is used as an adjective to define the particular group of ‘*Ertong*’ (children) who live with impairments. Nonetheless, I am not disputing the relevance

of the term ‘children with disabilities’ in naming this group of children, the idea being that they should be seen as children first before their medical conditions. Disability is considered to be a product of complex interactions among biological, psychological, cultural and socio-political factors (Shakespeare, 2006).

It needs to be clarified that the disabled children from regular schools who participated in this research were those who had already been formally designated as LRC pupils, as only such children are subject to the special provision directed at them through the implementation of LRC policy. It should not be ignored that many children who possibly meet disability criteria in China are not assigned any diagnosis or designation. This research is unable to represent the circumstances they face.

Researching inclusive education for a particular group of marginalised children might be seen as likely to reproduce exclusion by positioning them as ‘special’. However, I argue that if it is made explicit that only effective practice and pedagogy that work for all children, including those who tend to be vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion, can be counted as inclusive (Florian, 2014), the research would not necessarily reinforce the division between ‘special provision for some children’ and ‘regular education for the rest’. In China, where issues of gender, ethnicity, poverty and migration have been addressed in ensuring equal rights to regular education, disabled children’s exclusion is firmly legitimised by bodily difference and the scale of special schools is still expanding. Focusing on these children’s inclusion in education apparently has its significance for the approach to an inclusive system.

In the field of inclusive education research, adults’ views have been recurrently sought, such as those of teachers, headteachers or parents. In comparison, not only in China but also internationally, children’s voices are much less heard on issues of inclusion and exclusion (Gibson, 2006; Singal & Muthukrishna, 2014), which does not conform to researchers’ advocacy for listening to what children have to say (Allan, 2010; Barton, 2012; Carpenter & McConkey, 2012; Davis & Watson, 2000; Lewis & Porter, 2007).



Efforts to give prominence to children's voices are seen in the paradigm shift that emerged 20 years ago in the sociology of childhood and the pupil voice movement. The neglect of children's voices is deeply associated with the image of children as only 'adults-to-be', who are thus incompetent and whose views do not deserve to be known and taken into consideration (Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin & Robinson, 2010; Greenstein, 2016). This might explain the silence of disabled children in research literature on the implementation of LRC. In this research, disabled children are perceived as 'being and becomings', who can be their own gatekeepers as active and competent social actors (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Kellet, 2010; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004; Tisdall, 2012; James & Prout, 1997), and who are part of an ongoing process of transformation without being predetermined by a normative model of development (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008; Uprichard, 2008).

In recognising the practice of listening to children as a manifestation of inclusive values (Messiou, 2012; Morgan, 2011), this research has disabled children's voices at its heart (Nind, Benjamin, Sheehy, Collins & Hall, 2004), in keeping with the proposition that, as the receiving ends of educational provision in the name of inclusion, children should have the ultimate authority to comment on its impacts and reflect on their experiences of schooling. Meanwhile, promoting pupil voice should not result in marginalising teachers' voices (Flutter, 2007). I decided to engage teachers because they act as key decision-makers in schools in regard to children's learning and participation (Ainscow, 1991) and are essential partners in realising pupil voice through collaboration (Rudduck, 2007).

Informed by the literature review, the main research questions are formulated as:

- *How do disabled children (designated as LRC pupils) understand, experience and negotiate their learning and participation in regular schools in Shanghai?*
- *How do teachers, being significant adults for children, perceive and negotiate the learning and participation of disabled children (designated as LRC pupils)?*
- *What are the facilitators of and barriers to their learning and participation?*

Methodologically, this qualitative research adopts an ethnographic approach in order to describe and understand the views and experiences of disabled children and their teachers in regular schools in a holistic and in-depth way. It differs from the majority of research on the implementation of LRC, which has mainly investigated teachers' attitudes through quantitative surveys (e.g. Yu, 2011). Underpinned by positivism/post-positivism, this kind of research fails to represent the complex reality of schooling. Instead, located in social and transformative constructivism, the current research turns its gaze onto the way participants' meanings, identities and circumstances alter, change and become fluid through everyday negotiation and social interaction (Burr, 2015; Hammersley, 2014). Rather than being a detached researcher collecting 'objective' facts, I recognise my own subjectivity in the research process, which requires me to exercise the principle of reflexivity so as to actively scrutinise my role in data generation and interpretation (Foster, 1996; Mills & Morton, 2013).

This research moves from research *on* children to research *with* children (Fraser, 2004). Changing the perceptions of who disabled children are and what they can do entails an exploration of more suitable and innovative methods to elicit their voices. Children's rights to and agency in participation are respected throughout the research process, and careful and nuanced consideration is given to issues such as power relations, effective communication, ethics and specific techniques to support disabled children's participation in a research project.

The *Framework for Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) was employed as a research tool to facilitate my inquiry by informing the collection and analysis of data. Besides carrying out participant observation in schools and interviews with teachers, inspired by the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2001), I used several participatory activities to support children in expressing their opinions, comments, thoughts and feelings with reduced control by adults (Darbyshire, MacDougall & Schiller, 2005). Nevertheless, this research does not claim to be 'participatory research' because it is not fully led by children in terms of determining the research focus, methods of collecting and analysing data, and research procedure.

Finally, this research intends to highlight more culturally distinctive phenomena which might be less reported in research addressing western contexts. Conducted in the social, cultural and educational context of China (more specifically Shanghai), sufficient contextual information should be provided. Local cultural beliefs and meanings could be understood and represented. Indeed, it is through engagement with local realities that the route to effectively approaching inclusive education can be identified.

Several purposes are expected to be achieved through this inquiry. First, it mainly aims to contribute to knowledge of the current status of Chinese disabled children's inclusion in regular schools through the implementation of LRC policy. Second, it attempts to explore the implications of listening to pupil voice for inclusive education, especially for the development of inclusive practice in classrooms and schools. Additionally, it should be able to add to the methodological knowledge on researching inclusion in Chinese schools and how to elicit disabled children's voices by innovative, participatory and supportive methods and techniques.

Important insights have been gained from this research. First, it reaffirms that pupil voice should be heard. Children's knowledge, observations and reflections could tremendously enrich the understanding of the schooling process. They exercised their agency to negotiate the circumstances in which they were living. Children who participated in this research provided invaluable comments on school practice and identified what needed to be improved. Second, it was found that although LRC policy has been framed as an inclusive educational policy for disabled children in China, a discrepancy between its policy goals and the school reality was evident. Children reported experiences of marginalisation and exclusion in several aspects of their school lives, from academic learning to peer relationships. They also had to face negative labelling effects and stigma, which were generated by differentiated treatment. Third, barriers to disabled children's inclusion in regular schools were identified as the introduction of special educational thinking and practice, the charitable model of disability in Confucian society, and the prevailing competitive and performative school culture. Meanwhile, this research was able to explore the existing inclusive practice in Chinese classrooms. Teachers' role in negotiating all

children's learning and participation was highlighted. It was found that inclusive teachers also tended to draw on children's views and experiences to inform their own practice. I argue that listening to pupil voice has great implications for the development of inclusive practice. This research concluded that a paradigm shift was needed in China to encourage new ways of thinking and researching. Children must be engaged as essential partners in order to transform current schooling and imagine the possibilities for inclusive education.

### 1.3 Structure of the thesis

Chapter 2 aims to provide essential background information about the research context surrounding the educational inclusion of disabled children in China. It begins with a brief introduction to the Chinese education system. In light of international literature, I successively introduce the definition and identification of disability in China, the history of its parallel special education system to accommodate disabled children, and the advent of integrated schooling in the late 1980s with the implementation of LRC. By examining its policy changes, I point out that LRC has served global and local concerns at different periods of time. After setting out its ongoing issues and challenges, I turn to a review of available empirical research on the implementation of LRC, and argue that less is known about the current status of disabled children's learning and participation in regular schools, especially inasmuch as the voices of these children have been largely missing. At the end of the chapter, I explain why I locate the research site in Shanghai, which operates a high-performing education system while implementing LRC initiatives to promote disabled children's inclusion in regular schools.

Chapter 3 presents a review of literature on issues relevant to this inquiry, drawing on perspectives from research on inclusive education, pupil voice, disability studies and childhood studies. In the first half of the chapter, I unpack the debates and arguments around the meaning of inclusive education. I argue for the importance of developing inclusive practice and pedagogy as ways of giving meaning to inclusion (Florian, 2008). I also note that the implementation of inclusive education in international contexts should avoid imposing models of practice in an uncritical manner. In the second half of the chapter, I examine the reasons why disabled

children's voices have been overlooked and how their voices could be promoted through recognition of children as active and competent social actors. To seek pupil voice within inclusive practice, I summarise five propositions on the potential implications of listening to children for the development of inclusive practice. I review several research studies that focus on pupils' perspectives on inclusive education. Before introducing the formulated research questions, I also explain the need to engage teachers in pupil voice research.

Chapter 4 discusses methodological considerations for the research and illustrates the research design. I first identify my epistemological stance as social and transformative constructivism. Then, extensive discussion is devoted to the major challenges of researching with children, such as balancing relations in the field, facilitating communication, choosing suitable methods for eliciting children's views, and paying attention to specific techniques for supporting disabled children's participation in this research. I introduce the overall research design as qualitative and exploratory, which involves both deductive and inductive processes, before I briefly describe the research procedure. I discuss the adoption and adaptation of the *Framework for Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) as a research tool to inform data collection and analysis. I justify my choice of the ethnographic approach, explaining why I consider it the most appropriate stance for this inquiry, and review the impacts of my identity on the research. I also describe how ethics has been addressed throughout the research process and how trustworthiness was ensured.

Chapter 5 offers a detailed illustration and justification of the methods that were used to gather and analyse data. The chapter begins with a discussion of sampling strategy and an overview of research participants. Then I describe the procedure for carrying out the fieldwork and how data were collected through multiple methods including participant observation, participatory activities with children, and semi-structured interviews with teachers. In terms of data analysis, I note that the method of interpreting data should be coherent with the epistemological paradigm. In particular, I also address my method of overcoming the initial challenges in understanding children's data by reflecting on my own assumptions. Next, I describe how the analytical process took place during data collection and how a more systematic

examination was conducted afterwards, informed by thematic analysis. Several stages were involved, such as data organisation, immersion, coding, integrating data sets, identifying significant events and structuring the presentation of findings.

Chapter 6 reports the research findings and interpretations. It draws on the structure of the *Framework for Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) to present how the four elements of participation – access, collaboration, achievement and diversity – are reflected in disabled children's everyday school lives in Shanghai's regular schools. In terms of access, I describe how disabled children faced restricted opportunities to access curriculum, extra-curricular activities and places in schools, although their access to regular schools was safeguarded by the implementation of LRC. Then I illustrate how children learned alongside each other, how teachers worked together and how teachers could also learn from children. I further examine disabled children's learning and achievements in schools. Finally, I turn to discussion of acceptance and recognition among children and teachers. I describe disabled children's experiences of friendships and bullying, and relationships between teachers and these children.

Chapter 7 provides a discussion of what could be learned from the research findings in the light of previous literature. I review the proposition that disabled children can offer invaluable insights into the schooling process. I note that hearing children is not a straightforward activity, and that trust is a critical pre-condition of enabling the emergence of pupil voice. I continue to discuss teachers' role in negotiating disabled children's learning and participation, and stress a worrying tendency to underplay regular teachers' knowledge and expertise. Based on the lessons learned, I revisit the five propositions that I lay out in Chapter 3 on the implications of pupil voice for inclusive practice. I argue that the implementation of LRC is insufficient for addressing the agenda of disabled children's inclusion in regular schools. I call for a paradigm shift in how we understand, practise and research inclusive education in China. I propose a working model for transforming schooling towards inclusive education, with pupil voice as the core starting point.

Chapter 8 gives the conclusion of the research. I first present a summary of the main research findings and arguments in relation to the research questions. I reflect on the

limitations of this study, namely the use of a consultative approach and the sole focus on a particular group of disabled children. I lay out the research's contributions as significantly expanding the existing knowledge of inclusive education for disabled children in China, reaffirming the relevance of listening to pupil voice for inclusive practice development, and adding to the methodological knowledge of research into inclusive education in Chinese schools and methods of eliciting disabled children's voices. Finally, I make several suggestions for future research, policy and practice before concluding the thesis with personal reflections.

# **Section one: Background literature**

## **Chapter 2 Disabled children in Chinese education**

### **2.1 Introduction**

When notions such as disabled children, special education or inclusive education are widely used in international research, it becomes critically important to avoid overlooking the differences in their meanings across education systems, and the way issues around the inclusion of disabled children are embedded in a jurisdiction's historical, social and cultural context. This chapter aims to provide essential contextual knowledge of education for disabled children in China. It starts with a brief introduction to the Chinese education system in terms of its characteristics and transitional status. In section 2.3, I discuss the definition and identification of disability in China and examine the development of the parallel special education system to accommodate disabled children. Then in section 2.3.3, I take a closer look at the LRC policy, its ongoing issues and challenges, and what is known about its implementation. Gaps in knowledge are identified through a review of relevant research. Before ending the chapter, I further explain why I chose to conduct this research in Shanghai.

### **2.2 Chinese education system – characteristics and reforms**

The education system in China has been transformed in the context of constant social and political change. When the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, it was estimated that more than 80% of the population received little or no education (Central People's Government [CPG], 2011a). Its education system was developed with an emphasis on centralisation, standards and government control. Underpinned by Communist political ideology, the purpose of education was framed as serving production needs (Arens, 1952). Basic education was promoted as essential for eliminating illiteracy and supplying skilled workers. During 1949-1957, primary education and secondary education were expanded (Tsang, 2000).



However, in 1958, with the beginning of the Great Leap Forward movement, students were required to replace part of their schooling time with labour to accelerate industrialisation, and there was a decline in the rate of enrolment in primary education (Tsang, 2000). Later, the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) further impeded the development of education, as schools were closed and many teachers and intellectuals were suspended. The National University Entrance Examination (*Gaokao*) was replaced by nomination of people who were ‘politically advanced’ in communist doctrine and practice. Due to the chaotic situation in the country, there was no accurate record of the illiteracy rate.

After a halt was called on the political movement, the focus of the country’s development was shifted to the economy. To recover from the interruption and reconnect with the world, the modernisation of education was initiated in the 1980s through the Reform and Opening-up policies, to prepare human resources for strengthening the socialist country (Communist Party of China Central Committee [CPCCC], 1985). Since the enactment of the Law of Compulsory Education in 1986 (National People’s Congress [NPC], 1986), the coverage of compulsory education has greatly expanded and achieved one of the Millennium Development Goals (UN, 2000), which was universalising primary education.

The current education system consists of basic education, vocational education, higher education and adult education (Table 2.1). Basic education includes preschool education, primary education and secondary education. It is prioritised by the central government as the key field of infrastructure construction and educational development (CPG, 2011b). Compulsory education includes 6 (or 5) years of primary education and 3 (or 4) years of junior secondary education. Free compulsory education is provided in state schools<sup>2</sup>, and most children go to schools in the catchment areas where they live. After 9 years of compulsory education, children

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<sup>2</sup> When PRC was established, all the existing schools in the country, which were mostly private and international schools, were taken over by the central government and transformed into state schools. It was not until the 1980s that more private schools started to reappear, and were recognised as a supplementary strategy for providing education when there were not enough places in local state schools. Nevertheless, state schools benefit from increasing financial support from the government and tend to attract high-performing pupils and teachers. The scale of private education has remained rather small especially at compulsory level. For example, in 2013, nationally nearly 93% of pupils who started primary education were enrolled in state schools (MoE, 2013).

may go to general senior secondary schools (academic-oriented) or vocational schools (employment-oriented). Children are selected into different senior secondary schools mainly based on their academic performance in regionally standardised entrance examinations. After another 3 years of study, in order to access higher education children can either enter the National University Entrance Examination or independent university selection. Higher education includes university (undergraduate and postgraduate study) and non-university tertiary (college). Adult education provides educational services for learners who are beyond normal school age at all levels from primary to higher education. At present, online and distance education are promoted to implement lifelong learning.

Table 2.1 Education system of China

University	Non-university Tertiary	Adult Education
National University Entrance Examination/ Independent University Selection		
General Senior Secondary Education	Vocational Secondary Education	
Senior Secondary School Entrance Examination		
General Junior Secondary Education	Vocational Junior Secondary Education	Compulsory Education
Primary Education		
Preschool Education		

In China, education is seen as the key to social mobility; thus schooling and teachers are generally respected (OECD, 2010), as can be discerned from the term for teacher – ‘*Jiaoshi*’, which means the master of teaching (Tan, 2013). Confucianism is central to Chinese educational beliefs and practice. The philosopher was an advocate of mass education (Tan, 2014), arguing that education should be provided for every person regardless of differences<sup>3</sup> (*Youjiaowulei*), and should cater for each child’s characteristics (*Yincaishijiao*). In his vision, an ideal society is one where people live together in harmony, with every person finding the place that is prescribed for him or her to promote the functioning of society. Influenced by Confucianism, in Chinese schools the hierarchy between teachers and students tends to be accepted: students

are expected to show respect for teachers' authority by being obedient. Also, Confucianism encourages people who live in a community to treat each other's parents and children the same as their own (Piao, 1992), a principle reflected in Chinese schools in that teachers (especially class teachers) tend to form close relationships with their pupils.

The Chinese education system is highly competitive, featuring high-stake exams. The academic performance of a child is critical for his/her chance to go to a school or university having a higher status, which is believed to be essential for a person's future opportunities. Schools and families are highly committed to supporting children's academic learning. Teachers work extra hours to provide tutoring, and parents often take care of a child's study outside school hours, for example by helping with homework. Besides doing a considerable amount of homework on a daily basis, it is also common for children to use commercial educational services during weekends and holidays. In addition, schools' funding and reputation are mainly determined by pupils' academic attainments. With limited basic salaries (OECD, 2010), teachers face real-life pressure to earn performance-related bonuses by increasing pupils' academic attainments. In this respect, the modernised Chinese education system is not very different from its western counterparts inasmuch as 'teaching becomes the process of delivering a body of pre-specified information, knowledge, and skills controlled by a system of assessment and examination' (Deng, 2011: 561).

The class size in Chinese schools is still considered large (around 30-50), though it has already dropped significantly (in the early 1990s, I had 90 classmates in my primary school). Classroom teaching and learning are usually organised by one teacher without support from teaching assistants. Influenced by the Soviet education model, before modernisation, it was stressed that schooling should be teacher-centred, classroom-centred and textbook-centred (Tan, 2013). Aligned with the notion of the 'banking model of education' (Freire, 1972), knowledge transmitted by teachers was construed as static and ultimately true, and thus was to be acquired by students.

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<sup>3</sup> Confucius was focusing on how education could benefit social mobility in terms of social class.

In the early 1990s, the most influential national curriculum reform took place, which promoted ‘quality education’ (*Suzhi Jiaoyu*)<sup>4</sup>, with the aim of shifting the ‘subject-centred, knowledge-and fact-centred, and teacher-centred curriculum to an interdisciplinary, comprehensive qualities-oriented, and student-centred curriculum’ (Lou, 2011: 74). Students would strive for the ‘full development’ (*Quanmianfazhan*) of ‘morality, intelligence, health, aesthetics and labor capacity’ (SC, 1999). The range of subjects available to students was greatly widened, implying recognition of diverse achievements beyond the core subjects such as Maths or Chinese Language. Textbooks were changed to include more group-learning activities, discussion, and hands-on investigations. Extra-curricular activities were developed. The continuing reform had as its original purpose the transformation of passive learning into active and creative learning, and a reduction in students’ heavy workload so as to restore a happy childhood for children.

However, as argued by Lou (2011), the reform seems to have failed to make a difference – it was ‘an old wine in a new bottle’, especially when the results of standardised exams still had a determinant impact on schooling. Therefore, in Chinese classrooms, the teacher-centred pedagogy is still common: teachers give instructions, then students are required to memorise the principles and complete exercise books by giving the right answers to questions. The pressure to produce satisfying exam results seems to reinforce the teach-to-test phenomenon.

In recent years, the issue of inequity in Chinese education has gained more public attention (Huang, 2004). First, the selection based on a child’s academic performance in a narrow range of core subjects inevitably means that children’s individualities are not fully recognised and some children are doomed to ‘lose’ the competition. Second, certain groups of children still face barriers to accessing quality education and are vulnerable to exclusion and marginalisation. These groups include disabled children, migrant and left-behind children (*Liushou Ertong*)<sup>5</sup> or socio-economically disadvantaged children (Li, 2004). Third, growing regional gaps in educational

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<sup>4</sup> There is still much debate over what ‘*Suzhi*’ actually means. It could be literally translated as ‘qualities’ of a person, with ‘*Suzhi Jiaoyu*’ meaning an education that enhances pupils’ ‘qualities’.

achievement have been seen, especially between urban and rural areas, and between eastern and western parts of the country.

In 2006, the need to lower the extent of inequity was addressed in the revised Law of Compulsory Education (NPC, 2006). For instance, children's right to education is re-emphasised for vulnerable groups; compulsory education is required to be free in state schools<sup>6</sup>; the nomination of 'key schools' and 'key classes' was terminated<sup>7</sup>. The notion of 'balanced education' (*Junheng Jiaoyu*) was also put forward, addressing the agenda of equality and equity in the Chinese education system, by reducing gaps between schools, regions and urban-rural areas (SC, 2012). The provision of education for migrant children, left-behind children and disabled children was particularly stressed.

In all, the Chinese education system is undergoing intensive reform at policy and structural levels, with the aim of promoting both achievement and equity. Within schools, the constant policy changes engender a sense of uncertainty, as teachers are introduced to many unfamiliar notions and initiatives with limited guidance on practice.

## 2.3 Educational provision for disabled children

When a concept or terminology travels across contexts, it should not be assumed that one fixed and universal definition necessarily exists; notions like 'disability' or 'special education' should be examined as 'historically situated and culturally specific' (Armstrong & Barton, 2007: 10). In the following section, I will introduce the educational provision for disabled children in China by reviewing the definition and identification of disability, the development of the special education system, and the status of the current integrated provision with the implementation of LRC.

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<sup>5</sup> 'Left-behind children' (*Liushou Ertong*) refers to children of migrant workers who are still living in their hometown rather than travelling with their parents, resulting in large numbers of children who grow up without being looked after by their parents.

<sup>6</sup> Although this measure abolishes overtly charged fees for uniforms or textbooks, families still need to pay for extra-curricular activities such as field trips. Children living in poverty thus might be subject to marginalisation.

<sup>7</sup> The identification of 'key schools' (*Zhongdian Xuexiao*) started right after Reform and Opening-up. The nominated schools would be allocated more resources with which to prepare the future élites. Although the nomination system was cancelled in 2006, these schools still tend to remain famous and popular due to their possession of qualified teachers and sufficient facilities.

### 2.3.1 Disability in China

In ancient times, Chinese scholars were already seeking better understanding of impairments such as blindness and deafness and trying to formulate explanations of their causes as well as preventative strategies (Yang & Wang, 1994). From B.C. 770 to B.C. 221, providing for people with impairments (along with other disadvantaged groups such as young children, elders and women etc.) was emphasised by Confucius, in alignment with the prevailing moral values of benevolence, humanity and selflessness in Chinese culture (Shen, McCabe & Chi, 2008; Yang & Wang, 1994; Yu, Su & Liu, 2011). Taking care of this group of people was appreciated as a community's shared responsibility (Shen et al., 2008). Since the initiation of Reform and Opening-up in 1978, there has been a social transition from underplaying differences in a socialist society towards the acceptance and even encouragement of differences economically, socially and individually (Shen et al., 2008). People with impairments, who had formerly been looked after by families and communities, started to face exclusion from workplaces for being unable to perform as productive labour in the market-oriented economy (Pearson, Wong & Pierini, 2002).

The modern concept of disability (*Canji*)<sup>8</sup> arrived in China in the 1980s with the UN campaign on disability issues. As discussed by Kohrman (2005), the country had seen a massive process of medicalisation to regulate those who were perceived as 'dysfunctional', 'needy', 'special' or 'different' (p. 6). In the same period, the first national organisation led by disabled people – the China Disabled Person's Federation (CDPF) – was formed and rapidly expanded. It undertakes some of the government's administrative actions on disability, expressing the ethos of

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<sup>8</sup> Behaviour towards disabled people could be oriented according to the meaning ascribed to the language of disability (Oliver 1990). Enabling terminologies have been advocated by researchers to avoid reproducing the negative stigma on disability (Auslander & Gold, 1999; Haller et al., 2006). In China, 3 words could be used to describe 'disability' - *Canfei*, *Canji* and *Canzhang*. These words all share the same one character '*Can*', which means 'incomplete'. The subtle difference lies in the second character of each word: '*Fei*' means useless; '*Ji*' means disease and illness; '*Zhang*' means barriers. Therefore, *Canfei* is seen as a discriminative term conveying an inferior image of disabled people. *Canji* is the most commonly used term in legal and policy documents, but it can also be used to mean impairment, because there is no clear distinction between impairment and disability in the Chinese language. *Canzhang* is mostly used in regions like Hong Kong and is favoured by NGOs, as it places more stress on barriers to participation.

representing the collective interests of the group<sup>9</sup>, and plays important roles in legislation regarding the rights, welfare, services and identification of disabled people. Furthermore, CDPF is authorised to issue the Certificate of Disability, which a disabled person must have in order to be entitled to disability benefits such as public transport concessions, rehabilitation or special educational services.

The social process involved in the identification of disability should be acknowledged (Hollenweger, 2011). The early official definition of disability in the ‘Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Persons with Disabilities’ (LPPD. National People’s Congress Standing Committee [NPCSC], 1990) showed a high degree of consistency with the approach adopted by the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps (ICIDH. WHO, 1980)<sup>10</sup>: a disabled person being defined as one ‘who suffers from abnormalities or loss of a certain organ or function, psychologically or physiologically, or in anatomical structure and has lost wholly or in part the ability to perform an activity in the way considered normal’ (LPPD: Article 2); the definition remained the same in the 2008 revised version of the LPPD (NPCSC, 2008).

Later, China adapted its official definition of disability (National Committee of Standardisation [NCS], 2011) to the *biopsychosocial* model – a synthesis of the medical and social models of disability<sup>11</sup>, which was proposed in the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF. WHO, 2001, 2002). In 2011, the first national standard for disability assessment and diagnosis was issued,

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<sup>9</sup> However, in contrast to the UK disability movement (Campell & Oliver, 1996), CDPF was not formed in a self-organised way for social and political struggle. In fact, its claim to represent a collective voice of disabled people has been questioned and its dominant position might well marginalise other grassroots disability organisations (Lee & Regan, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> The definition of disability in the ICIDH has been strongly criticised by disabled people for its predominantly medical discourse (Barnes & Mercer, 1997; Oliver, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Generated by the disability movement for political struggle (Barnes, Oliver & Barton, 2002; Thomas, 2002), a social model of disability challenges the need for a causal relationship between a person’s impairment and disabling experiences such as restrictions on participation, and sees disability as the product of structural, institutional, economic, environmental, attitudinal and social barriers. The model thus empowers disabled people to bring social change (Allan, 2010; Oliver, 2004). With a shared stance of firmly rejecting a pathological view of disability, there have also been various models of disability which encompass personal, bodily and emotional experiences with impairments (Abberley, 1987; Crow, 1996; Greenstein, 2015; Shakespeare & Watson, 2002; Thomas, 1999), ambiguous disability identity (Garland-Thomson & Bailey, 2010), and the commonality of human experience regardless of the problematic division of disabled/non-disabled (Cameron, 2010, 2014; Swain & French, 2000).

which defined disability as ‘the impairment of body structure or function, activity limitation and participation restriction’ (Ministry of Civil Affairs [MoCA], 2011)<sup>12</sup>. Now disabilities are classified into 6 categories: visual disability, hearing disability, speech disability, physical disability, intellectual disability and psychiatric disability. But regardless of changes of definition in policy texts, the identification of disability in practice is still largely determined by medical diagnosis (Peng & Wang, 2010).

Considering the affordability of China’s social welfare system, the whole disability population has been deliberately controlled through restrictions on designation (CDPF, 2011), which might result in a much lower rate of disability than the global estimate of 15% (WHO & WB, 2011). According to the most recent National Census of People with Disabilities, it was estimated that 6.39% of the population (82 million) were living with disabilities (National Bureau of Statistics of China [NBSC], 2006). The census also indicated that in 2006, there were around 2.46 million disabled children between the ages of 6 and 14 (school age for compulsory education); however, only 63.2% of these children were receiving education in regular and special schools (Law, 2011). The national statistics also showed that disabled people tended to access limited education and to live in poverty: 43.29% of the disabled people surveyed (aged 15 and above) were illiterate, a percentage significantly higher than the national average illiteracy rate for the same period- 7.59% (NBSC, 2006, 2011). Meanwhile, 13.28% of urban disabled people and 5.12% of rural disabled people were receiving the ‘minimum subsistence allowance’ (NBSC, 2006), but the rates for the whole urban and rural population receiving living benefits were much lower – 3.88% and 2.05% respectively (MoCA, 2007).

The Chinese approach to disability after the economic reform has been medical, charity and welfare oriented, with less attention paid to disability rights, anti-discrimination measures, and disabled people’s grassroots pressure (Lee & Regan,

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<sup>12</sup> Compared to *The Practical Assessment Standards of Disability* (CDPF, 1995), the latest classification system in *the Disability Classification and Grading* has expanded its scope from the mild disability level to cover more conditions (MoCA, 2011).



2010). In Chinese society, having a disabled child is often seen as a tragedy<sup>13</sup>, a consequence of karma, and something that families should feel ashamed of (Merry & Zhao, 1998). Lee and Regan (2010) argued that it was anomalous that the social model of disability, which ought to be embraced in China for its Marxist and socialist political ideology, instead could claim little impact on the Chinese construction of disability. Although caring and sympathy for disabled people are generally valued in China, it is unclear whether these people are considered entitled to equal rights of participation. Confucian thought might reinforce disabled people's position at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Deng & Harris, 2008). Their voices are still far less heard than the voices of others (Lee & Regan, 2010; Pearson et al., 2002). In this research, I align my stance with an interactive model of disability, recognising the complex interactions among biological, psychological, cultural and socio-political factors (Shakespeare, 2006).

### 2.3.2 The development of special education

Before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was no sign of large-scale public special education for disabled people, apart from limited historical records showing that some disabled people did manage to receive education and serve the feudal bureaucracy. Formal special education began to appear when foreigners came to China as missionaries or for business or other purposes. For example, in 1874, a Scottish Presbyterian pastor, William Murray, opened the first special school for blind children in Beijing<sup>14</sup>. During the period of the Republic of China, state special schools were opened to accommodate blind and deaf children. When the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, there were 42 special schools in the country with around two thousand pupils, most of which were run by religious or charitable organisations (Hampton & Xiao, 2009; Yang & Wang, 1994).

Disabled children are often not regarded as the eligible recipients of regular education when an education system is devised (Goodley, 2010). When the central

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<sup>13</sup> For example, similarly to western medical practice, doctors would advise termination of pregnancy with impaired fetuses, which implies a tragic view of disability and impairment (Swain & French, 2000). Families that had given birth to a disabled child would be allowed to have another child, being exempted on that basis from the country's birth control plan.

<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed introduction to early special schools in China, see Pang and Richey (2006).

government of the PRC was setting up the education system, disabled children had already been differentiated from other children as those not eligible to receive regular education; the parallel special education system was soon developed to open special schools for ‘blind, deaf and mute’ children (Government Administrative Council [GAC], 1951). In 1959, special schools for children with learning difficulties<sup>15</sup> started to appear. The scale of the special education system continued to expand with the opening of more special schools across the country.

The period of Reform and Opening-up has seen the development of legislation regarding special education and disabled children’s educational rights. In the first Constitution of the People’s Republic of China (NPC, 1982), it was stated that ‘the country and the society will help arrange blind, deaf, mute or other disabled citizens’ employment, living and education’ (Article 45). In the Law of Compulsory Education (NPC, 1986), it was stipulated that all children were entitled to receive 9-year compulsory education, with special education for disabled children constituting a part of compulsory education. In 1989, in the ‘Several Opinions on the Development of Special Education’ (MoE, State Planning Commission, MoCA, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Personnel, Ministry of Labor, Ministry of Health & CDPF, 1989), the role of special education in promoting the equal social participation of disabled children was highlighted. Legal protection for disabled children’s educational rights was further stipulated in ‘The Regulation of Education for People with Disabilities’ (State Council [SC], 1994). In LPPD (NPCSC, 1990, 2008), disabled children’s educational rights were reaffirmed, and the categories were widened to include children with physical, psychiatric and multiple impairments. In 2008, improvement in disabled children’s living and working conditions was affirmed as important and urgent for building a harmonious Chinese society (SC, 2008).

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<sup>15</sup> In China, the term ‘Mental Retardation’ is applied to this category, following the DSM-IV diagnostic criteria. There has been much debate about the meaning and usage of terms such as ‘Intellectual Disabilities’, ‘Learning Disabilities’ or ‘Learning Difficulties’. In this research, ‘Learning Difficulties’ is used, on the understanding that difficulties in children’s learning are generated through interactive processes rather than solely derived from the children’s characteristics. The term also sounds less discriminative and is preferred by disability organisations such as People First.

Nevertheless, the differentiation of provision for disabled children has continued in China with the maintenance of special education and segregated schooling. As stated in the Law of Compulsory Education (NPC, 1986), Local Educational Authorities (LEAs) were encouraged to open special schools or special classes for disabled children: ‘local governments should set up special schools (classes) for blind, deaf/mute and mental retarded children’ (Article 9). Indeed, even if the educational rights of certain groups of children were particularly stressed – ‘All children who reach 6 years should attend schools to receive the stipulated years of compulsory education, regardless of gender, ethnic and race’ (NPC, 1986: Article 5) – ability difference was paid no attention (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), which inevitably left space for regular schools to deny access for disabled children. Special schools are positioned as the core – the ‘backbone’ – of the special education system, and special classes and regular classes serve as the ‘body’ (SC, 1990). Most special schools provide 9-year compulsory education, as suggested in the ‘Temporary Regulation for the System of Special Schools’ (MoE, 1998), and a set of subjects forming a special curriculum is implemented based on the categories of impairments. The number of special schools has been increasing while the percentage of disabled children in regular classes is showing a trend to decrease. As shown in Appendix-A, in 1987, there were 505 special schools with 52, 976 pupils (Yang & Wang, 1994) and in 2013, there were 1933 special schools with about 0.37 million pupils (MoE, 2013). In the recent critical educational policy ‘Mid-term and Long-term Plan of Educational Reform (2010-2020)’ (SCSC, 2010), the government explicitly made a commitment to open more special schools at a faster pace to expand the coverage of compulsory education. By 2020, at least one special school is expected to be established for a city, or a town with a population of more than 0.3 million, and thus for relatively more disabled children.

When disabled children were largely excluded from any kind of formal schooling, special schools might have temporarily provided educational opportunities for these children. However, over the years, Chinese special schools have been firmly constructed as the most essential provision for disabled children, symbolising kindness, sympathy and moral responsibility towards this disadvantaged group. They are also positioned as the ‘knowledge centre’ for guiding regular schools in relation

to provision for disabled children. Furthermore, Shen et al. (2008) argued that the ideological change behind a social transition towards individualism underpinned the strengthening of special education, which encouraged the adoption of differing provision in response to children's diversity in abilities.

In the available academic literature, a critical and reflective view of the Chinese special education system has been significantly missing. There is much discussion of what is needed for the development of the system. For instance, Pang and Richey (2006) identified challenges in the identification and diagnostic procedures, access to post-compulsory or vocational education, circumstances for children with severe impairments, and family-professional collaboration. However, the negative impacts of segregated education have remained unquestioned, impacts such as reinforcement by special schools of the marginalisation and exclusion of disabled children, which leaves other children unaware of the importance of accepting and celebrating human diversity (Aspis, 2001). Although there have been more and more parent groups advocating the rights of disabled children to access regular schools, it remains unclear whether the continuing investment in special schools will result in a 'back streaming' of disabled children from regular schools to special schools.

Such lack of critical perspective is also seen in the identification and designation of Special Educational Needs (SEN) pupils in China. Although in some education systems, the SEN categories have become more diverse, having almost no direct links with children's impairments (Fulcher, 1989), globally, disabled children still appear to form a central group because of their medically diagnosed conditions, identifying them as the 'really disabled' (Benjamin, 2002). I need to point out that in China, at policy level, the borrowed notion of SEN is used to refer to disabled children's needs for special education; officially, only disabled children are designated as SEN pupils<sup>16</sup>. Children with visual, hearing/speech and intellectual impairments constitute the three main groups of SEN pupils.

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<sup>16</sup> In China, disabled children do not necessarily register with the special education system, which can be seen from the huge difference between the survey results in the 2<sup>nd</sup> National Census of People with Disabilities (NBSC, 2006) and the MoE's annual statistics on special education.

Similarly to the notion of disability, SEN should also be seen as a social construction. Globally, it has been accompanied by a growing awareness of the problematic construction of special education as perfectly right for some children, the way ‘needs’ are created by and serve the education system, and the exclusionary and pathological processes which cannot be readily challenged by changing the language designating categories (Armstrong & Barton, 1999; Arnold, 2014; Ball, 2013; Connor & Ferri, 2007; Greenstein, 2016; Norwich, 2010, 2013; Skrtic, 1991; Thomas & Loxley, 2007; Tomlinson, 1982).

Due to the absence of universal assessment of children’s health development in China, children’s impairments (especially less visible conditions such as learning difficulties) tend to gain adults’ notice after children start formal schooling. It is common that children who have already been enrolled in regular schools are identified and labelled with disability/SEN. Highly dependent on teachers’ reports, the identification of SEN pupils is derived from the interplay between disabled children’s impairments and educational environments. For example, the same child might be perceived by teachers as in need of special educational provision in one class, but not necessarily so if s/he is studying in another class. The national statistics of special education also suggest potential over-representation of disability in certain groups (Ebersold & Evans, 2008). According to the annual report for 2010 (MoE, 2011), the population of male SEN pupils was almost twice that of female pupils; the population of SEN pupils in rural areas was only half that in urban/town areas, though the overall population in rural and urban/town areas was nearly equal; and pupils with visual or intellectual impairments were more likely to be enrolled in regular schools than those with hearing/speech impairments. ‘The need for special education’ is likely to be understood as something inherently applicable to disabled children if all the social processes involved in the identification of SEN pupils are overlooked.

In China, there is still a lack of general awareness of disabled children’s equal rights to education in society (Shen et al., 2008), a situation which I feel will be impossible to change if the negative impacts of special schools and the rationale of ‘special education for disabled children’, mentioned above, are not challenged. I argue that

the debate should certainly not be restricted to an over-simplified judgement as between ‘regular’ or ‘special’, and I respect some disabled children’s and their parents’ realistic choices to attend/send their children to special schools. Continuing efforts need to be made to create more opportunities for all children’s learning and participation in a shared space regardless of their differences, to stop people using the ‘failure’ of inclusion of disabled children in regular schools as a powerful justification for the existence of special schools.

### **2.3.3 Integrating disabled children in regular education**

At present in China, disabled children are placed in special schools, special classes (in regular schools), regular classes, or other charity/welfare organisations. In the previous section, I have examined the development of special education and pointed out that special schools have long been positioned as the most appropriate provision for disabled children. Next, I will turn to a review of how disabled children are integrated in regular schools in China.

#### **2.3.3.1 The policy context**

Not long after the launch of the implementation of compulsory education in the 1980s, disabled children were marked out by the authorities as significant ‘obstacles’ to full coverage of compulsory education, because it was largely the case that these children still had no access to any form of schooling (MoE et al., 1989). Because of a shortage at that time of funding and resources with which to open more special schools, the central government came up with a cost-efficient strategy to resolve the situation: LEAs were requested to make use of existing regular schools by admitting disabled children in order to achieve a satisfying rate of enrolment (MoE et al., 1989). Pilot projects were carried out to explore the possibilities for integrating disabled children in regular schools, such as the ‘Golden Key Project’ (United Nations Children’s Fund [UNICEF] East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, 2003). In 1994 this strategy, whose title literally means ‘Learning in Regular Classrooms’, was articulated as a formal national policy (MoE, 1994; SC, 1994). In 2013, there were 187, 534 LRC designated pupils studying in regular classes, constituting about 51% of the whole SEN population (MoE, 2013).

The process of implementing LRC may appear quite similar to the movement for integration in education in western countries (Piao, 1996), represented by a rapidly increasing presence of disabled children in regular schools<sup>17</sup>. However, while the western notions of integration and inclusion were underpinned by a social and political movement for deinstitutionalisation and normalisation (Kozleski et al., 2011; Wolfensberger, 1972), the mainstreaming of disabled children in China was not based on the philosophy of social justice and equal access for all (Shen et al., 2008). It was mainly a practical approach adopted in order to comply with the Law of Compulsory Education (NPC, 1986), especially in rural areas where funding and available transportation were severely limited (Yang & Wang, 1994). The advent of LRC explicitly served as an instrument enabling LEAs to realise the performance targets set by the central government (MoE et al., 1989), rather than a means of truly recognising the importance for disabled children of access to regular educational provision.

However, only one month after the publication of the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), which strongly advocated inclusive education in policy and practice at all levels, the national policy statement ‘Temporary Procedures for Implementing Learning in Regular Classrooms’ (MoE, 1994) was issued. It stipulated a redistribution of resources to support the implementation of LRC and provided guidance for the design of educational provision for disabled children in regular schools. In the policy text, ‘regular school’ was prioritised as the predominant placement for disabled children (SC, 1994). Specific statistical targets were also outlined in the 9<sup>th</sup> 5-year plan for the ‘implementation of compulsory education for disabled children’ (MoE & CDPF, 1996).

Such radical reform of LRC’s policy framework has led to a debate over whether its implementation should be construed as equivalent to the international movement for inclusive education. On one side, scholars understand LRC as a direct initiative for addressing the global agenda of inclusive education (e.g. Chen, 1997; Malinen & Savolaine, 2008). Such a view apparently ignores the historical development of

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<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that the increasing number of disabled children in regular schools has been furthered not only by the practice of mainstreaming children from segregated settings, but also by an overall increase in the identification of disability in the student population (Fulcher, 1989).

LRC: the practice of enrolling disabled children in regular schools had already existed prior to the international support for the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994). In addition, rather than reflecting an aspiration to drive broader educational and social change, the implementation of LRC leaves unchallenged the beliefs and perspectives that continually legitimise the exclusion of disabled children in education. On the other side, scholars have attempted to highlight the indigenous ideological and cultural roots of LRC. For example, Deng and Poon-McBrayer (2012) pointed out that the inclusion of disabled children in China was supported by the Communist political agenda to transform disabled children into productive labourers. Yu, Su and Liu (2011) noted that the implementation of LRC was closely related to the Confucian humanitarian value of benevolence towards disadvantaged groups. Deng and Harris (2008) also argued that the influence of such deeply-rooted attitudes of sympathy towards disabled people should not be ignored.

Through a historical lens (Robinson, 2010), the evolution of LRC is seen as embedded in China's social change, with the constant modification of the notion having been driven by the tension between the global and the local (Ball, 2007). The advent of LRC as a cost-efficient strategy to expand compulsory education was aligned with the country's agenda of pursuing efficacy. The government was facing significant international pressure to present a 'modernised' state, together with local pressure on the legitimacy and accountability of the communist party-state after the disastrous political episode of the Cultural Revolution. With the quick-fix scheme of enrolling disabled children in regular schools, China's rapid expansion of compulsory education created an impression of huge progress in the *Education for All* movement (UNESCO, 1990). In 1994, with the international advocacy of inclusive education, the policy framework of LRC took a sudden 'inclusive' turn<sup>18</sup> and its discourse was promptly transformed to represent an already-existing policy addressing the inclusion of disabled children in regular schools in China, which amplified the moral image of the authorities. The suggested model of practice was a borrowed western model<sup>19</sup>, which introduced many notions that were unfamiliar in

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<sup>18</sup> In recent years, the most established academic journal on special education, the 'Chinese Journal of Special Education' has also renamed its existing section, formerly entitled 'Learning in Regular Classrooms', as 'inclusive education'.

<sup>19</sup> Such borrowing reflected the unbalanced knowledge flow from the West to the East (Qi, 2014).



Chinese schooling, such as the ‘Individualised Educational Plan’ (IEP). However, the implementation of LRC at school level was overlooked for a long time. It was not until 15 years later that the authority responded to the concern that disabled children were being neglected despite being physically present in regular classrooms. In ‘Views on Promoting the Development of Special Education’ (MoE, 2009), further attention was paid to the quality of educational provision in regular schools.

In line with Deng and Zhu (2007), I agree that LRC should be understood by examining the interaction between the international movement of inclusive education and the local circumstances of China at different historical phases. It is neither an ‘original invention of China’ nor a ‘pure application of the western inclusive education model’ (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2012). However, when Deng and Zhu (2007) portrayed LRC as a pragmatic model for inclusion on the basis of China’s economic, social and political constraints, they tended to justify the status of LRC as an unavoidably temporary stage because of structural barriers such as resources or class size. I argue that such an assertion not only tends to legitimise the unsatisfactory quality of educational provision in regular schools, but also fails to recognise the importance of actively negotiating positive change in everyday schooling practice, rather than passively waiting for the broader context to become favourable for inclusive education.

### 2.3.3.2 Issues and challenges

In accordance with the lack of a critical voice on disability and special education, researchers in China mostly tend to highlight the positive influences of LRC. For instance, Yu, Su and Liu (2011) summarised the situation by saying that the implementation of LRC had brought benefits for both individuals and institutions in the following aspects: ‘improving social inclusion and benefitting the full development of children with disabilities’, ‘making a difference in the knowledge and perceptions of administrators and teachers in the general educational system’, ‘increasing the enrolment rate of children with disabilities in compulsory education’ and ‘saving educational investment for national and local governments’ (p. 358-359). The issues that might impede the inclusion of disabled children are rarely discussed.

In the following section, I will lay out several key issues that reflect the gap between LRC and inclusive education.

### *Conditional rights to access regular schools*

Compared to the promotion of social participation for disabled adults under CDPF's rights campaign in the 1980s, disabled children were left out because they were not recognised as productive workers (Kohrman, 2005). Although we have seen a rhetorical change towards gradually recognising disabled children's right to access regular education (SC, 1994), as in many other countries, such a right is still presented as conditional.

Disabled children's restricted rights to access regular schools have been explicitly stipulated. In 'Several Opinions on the Development of Special Education' (MoE et al., 1989), it was stated that disabled children could only be accepted if they demonstrated the ability to study in regular classrooms (Article 6). Similarly, in LPPD (NPCSC, 1990), the condition for access was that a disabled child should be able to 'adapt to regular school learning' (Article 22) or, in the revised version, 'receive regular education' (NPCSC, 2008: Article 19). Disabled children could either receive 'regular education or special education' depending on their 'disability categories and learning abilities' (NPCSC, 2008: Article 19). It was suggested that, besides teachers and parents, professionals with backgrounds in medicine, education and psychology should also be involved, to assess and identify children's disability conditions, and make decisions as to whether a child was suitable for learning in regular settings (MoE, 1994). The revised Law of Compulsory Education noted that only the 'rejection of accommodating school-age disabled children who have the ability to receive basic education in regular classrooms' was considered to be against the law (NPC, 2006: Article 57).

Although parents' and academics' advocacy has pushed forward the implementation of LRC (Shen et al., 2008), in the legal framework, regular schools still seem to be granted more power to determine disabled children's access by evaluating a child's ability to adapt him/herself to fit into an intact system through a process of assimilation. Children's voices were excluded from decision-making, and there were

still no questions asked as to whether a regular school should make efforts to change its own provision for all children's inclusion.

In recent years, the discourse of LRC has seen a 'rights' turn that admitted disabled children's access to regular schools as one of the fundamental human rights. It was articulated in the 'National Human Rights Action Plan of China (2012-2015)' that the government would 'promote compulsory education for disabled children in such a way that they attend the same classes as other healthy children where convenient' (Information Office of State Council [IOSC], 2012). Nevertheless, I argue that such re-articulation seems to be more of a reaction to international pressure for disability rights (UN, 2006) than a recognition of the relevance of educating disabled children in regular settings, given the fact that special and segregated education is still being promoted.

### *Unclear conceptualisation of inclusive education*

The conceptualisation of inclusive education in the Chinese policy framework is contested, inconsistent and confusing. In China, there is still no uniform translation of the widespread term 'inclusive education'. In regions like Hong Kong, where there has been a process of integration given its history as a British colony, 'inclusive' is translated as '*Ronghe*', which means 'fusion, mixture or merging'. However, in Mainland China, the word '*Quanna*', which literally means 'all in', was created and adopted by UNESCO. Usually, both terms are used interchangeably. But I argue that there are also subtle differences between the implications of the two terms. '*Ronghe*' is equivalent to 'inclusion' in the Chinese language; it places emphasis on the process of change when different elements come together. Here conflicts, tensions, negotiations and compromises are expected<sup>20</sup>. '*Quanna*', by contrast, highlights the establishment of a system which can accommodate all children. Thus it puts more emphasis on the ideal outcome than on the complicated process.

As noted already, in China, special schools are seen as the places providing specialist education for disabled children (Norwich, 2010). Strangely, special schools are

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<sup>20</sup> '*Ronghe*' sometimes could be used as the translation of 'integration', but the term '*Yitihua*' is more commonly used for that purpose.

framed as part of the inclusive education system in China, which downplays the negative impacts of segregation and justifies the opening of special schools. In the national report presented at the 48<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Education, the expansion of special schools was celebrated as a noteworthy achievement and a move towards an inclusive system (MoE & CNC-UNESCO, 2008). Also, in China's national report on implementing CRPD, the opening of more special schools was again mentioned as evidence of progress to be celebrated, the rationale of which was later questioned by the UN committee (UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2011, 2012).

In March 2013, the draft 'Regulation of Education for Disabled People (revised)' (MoE, 2013) was issued for public consultation. In it the term 'inclusive education' was adopted to refer to the kind of education provided for LRC pupils in regular schools. However, there was not a single word of explanation of what it meant and what it was supposed to look like in practice, as if whatever a child encountered in a regular school could qualify for the title of 'inclusive education'. Such a superficial equivalence between access to regular schools and inclusive education is problematic, because it ignores the question of whether disabled children have sufficient opportunities to learn and participate in regular schools.

### *The dominance of medical discourse*

As mentioned in section 2.3.1, the regulation of the disability population was embedded in a national social trend to medicalisation in China (Kohrman, 2005). The international categories of disability were adopted, and professionals (doctors, psychologists or other people in the community who were believed to have 'advanced' knowledge) would decide who should be labelled a 'disabled person'. When the special education system was set up to accommodate children who were categorised as having pathological impairments (Ebersold & Evans, 2008), a strong medical discourse of remedy prevailed.

Because the implementation of LRC is constructed as an extension of the special educational service, it is not surprising that the medical model of disability has also been introduced into regular schools. In recent years, a new initiative has been

implemented to promote ‘a combination of medicine and education’ (*Yijiaojiehe*), whereby regular schools were expected to seek professional advice from experts and specialists in order to carry out intervention to remedy disabled children’s ‘deficits’. It has engendered a demand for specialists and special educational personnel, who are assumed to be the right sources of support for disabled children. The need to promote such practice is framed as meeting the ‘practical’ needs of treatment for children’s impairments. Nevertheless, as Deng and Lu (2012) warned, such a notion risked simplifying the interdisciplinary approach to special education and ignoring what education was meant to be for these children. Meanwhile, the dominance of the medical model of disability might also persuade practitioners to invest their hopes in ‘normalising’ disabled children, rather than recognising the role of educational provision in constructing children’s educational difficulties. Thus it is not surprising that many scholars have attributed the difficulties of implementing LRC to a lack of specialists (e.g. Pang & Richey, 2006; Wang & Feng, 2014), or of funding for special educational provision such as resource classrooms (e.g. Law, 2011), while the potential negative consequences of such practice were overlooked.

### *The problem of identification*

I have mentioned before that the identification of disability/SEN in children involves a social process. The strong performance-related competition among children, teachers and schools may lead to an over-identification of those children who encounter difficulties in reaching the standards, a process which is rationalised as supporting individual children but mainly serves others’ needs (Greenstein, 2016). In some jurisdictions, the academic performance of an LRC pupil would be eliminated from the evaluation of teachers’ and schools’ performance. It has been reported that some schools would thus put pressure on under-performing pupils to take IQ tests in the hope that they would meet the medical criteria for disability; labelling pupils is said to have become a common strategy to ‘improve’ a school’s performance (Yangcheng Evening News, 2011). Once labelled, a child’s marginalisation and exclusion in education might be legitimised given the prevailing medical discourse of disability. So far there has been no research investigating whether the designation of LRC is likely to result in any marginalisation of disabled children’s learning in

regular schools. However, what is known is that disabled children's academic attainments cannot be guaranteed in regular classrooms (Liu & Su, 2014).

### *Classroom practice and teacher training*

It remains unclear what it is like in classrooms and schools following the implementation of LRC, despite researchers' impression that there had been no significant improvement of practice in regular classrooms since its advent in the 1980s (Deng, 2004). It was found that many regular schools had not made adjustments for its provision (Yu, 2011).

The common practice in Chinese classrooms, as described by Deng and Harris (2008), is that 'curriculum, instructional methods, and academic standards are identical for all students' (p. 202). They asserted that, with the increasing presence of disabled children in classrooms, teachers and schools were facing challenges because 'the traditional uniformity in viewing students' ability and rigidity of using a whole-class lecturing mode for all students was no longer valid for the newcomers with special needs' (p. 198). Shen et al. (2008) identified the uniformity of methods for educational activities in Chinese schools as one of the main structural restrictions on implementing LRC, because little space was provided for differentiated instruction or adapted means of assessment. Although some existing strategies for supporting disabled children in western schools have been introduced, explored and recommended, such as peer tutoring or differentiated teaching (Deng & Harris, 2008), Chinese teachers still tend to feel incompetent to provide individualised or differentiated education (Yu et al., 2011).

The deep-rooted teaching model in Chinese classrooms might appear different from that in western classrooms, where children's individual needs, goals and pace of progress tend to be emphasised. However, there seems to be a tendency to impose the idea that the most appropriate provision for disabled children must be something completely different. Such a rationale could have unwanted consequences, in that teachers might point to their own lack of competency to provide specialised teaching to justify the exclusion of disabled children (Black-Hawkins & Florian, 2012). I need to argue that supporting all children's learning certainly involves a more complex

process than a simplified division between uniform or differentiated teaching. It is problematic to jump to a conclusion that current Chinese classroom teaching is doomed to prove unsuitable for disabled children, because so far there is still a lack of any in-depth examination of Chinese teachers' inclusive practice in classrooms, and of how LRC pupils view the special provision offered them.

Training for pre-service and in-service teachers is undoubtedly greatly needed. Training for regular teachers is seen as particularly inadequate (Wang & Feng, 2014). Ma and Tan (2010) found that only 37% of the 410 LRC teachers surveyed in Shanghai had some training experience of special education or LRC. There is still no national standard qualification for teachers in special and inclusive education (Yu et al., 2011).

Law (2011) argued that one of the main challenges to inclusive education in China is the shortage of special education training for teachers, the result of which was that teachers had little knowledge of disabled children's educational needs. I agree that teacher training is essential for transforming teachers' practice in Chinese schools. Nevertheless, I argue that the critical issue is not just whether or not there is training for teachers, but also what the teachers are learning from their training. At present, when teachers attend special education or LRC training programmes, the content still features medical and psychological perspectives and knowledge of disability based on categories of impairments, which might be of only limited use in helping teachers to develop inclusive practice. For in-service teachers, classroom observation or mentoring by experienced teachers has turned out to be effective in helping new teachers to gain competence (Deng & Harris, 2008). However, caution should be exercised in promoting such strategies, because the hierarchy in Chinese schools might lead less experienced teachers to replicate exclusive practices under the guidance of their mentors.

### **2.3.3.3 The implementation of LRC**

Although LRC cannot be simply understood as a Chinese inclusive education policy, given the increasing knowledge exchange between China and other countries, research into LRC certainly offers a necessary starting point from which to explore

the issues surrounding inclusive education in the context of China. What have we learned about the implementation of LRC in schools thus far?

In China, research within the discipline of special education is dominated by medical and psychological perspectives underpinned by a functionalist and positivist paradigm of gaining objective, scientific and self-evident data (Skrtic, 1991). Much research is about finding out what's 'wrong' with disabled children and how to normalise them through interventions – conducted *on* children rather than *with* them. In terms of the inclusion of disabled children in regular schools, Piao (1998) pointed out that there had simply been too many summary-style papers, on the basis of which I also found it hard to draw any plausible conclusions, because of their general lack of critical orientation or research evidence in support of their claims.

Most of the empirical research on the implementation of LRC has investigated teachers' attitudes towards the presence of disabled children in regular schools by using the quantitative questionnaire method. This is seen as a common phenomenon at the early stage of integration (Fulcher, 1989; Jenkinson, 1997). When asked, teachers either identified difficulties with disabled children or structural factors. For example, in Yu's (2011) research, teachers attributed the difficulties they experienced to disabled children's lack of confidence and the slow pace of their academic progress. In other research, teachers have identified such barriers to implementing LRC as the lack of specialist knowledge, insufficient training, large class size, demanding academic standards, and unsupportive local authorities and communities (Liu, 2000; Qian & Jiang, 2004; Qing & Liu, 2007; Yu, 2011; Zhang & Chen, 2002). In Feng's (2010) research on Chinese teachers' professional motivation, teachers revealed a general concern about the 'incompatibility' between inclusive education and the Chinese social context, and felt that it was not a 'practical' decision to include disabled children in regular schools.

Moreover, I found a noticeable and recurring pattern in Chinese teachers' attitudes. As shown in Ma and Tan (2010)'s research, teachers rarely explicitly opposed the idea of enrolling disabled children into regular schools, but at the same time, they suggested that special schools were better places for disabled children. Deng and Zhu (2007) also noted the 'puzzle' that teachers tended to support conflicting ideas. In



another research study, Deng and Holdsworth (2007) found that teachers allowed the enrolment of disabled children into their classrooms mainly out of sympathy. The report produced by 'Save the Children' and the Chinese Research Institute of Education (2012) found that only about half the researched regular school leaders and around 62% of the regular teacher participants would endorse the implementation of LRC, and again, special provision, such as the resource classroom, was perceived as the most important and effective strategy for promoting the implementation of LRC. Therefore, although disabled children's access to regular schools might be accepted by teachers out of the humanitarian benevolence desired in Chinese society, they still believed that these children should be educated elsewhere than in a regular classroom.

There have been a few researchers with international backgrounds who explored disability issues in China from different theoretical perspectives. Practical challenges, obstacles and difficulties in conducting such research have been frequently reported (Deng & Holdsworth, 2007; Kohrman, 2005; Potts, 2000; Stone, 1997). In a comparative qualitative study on SEN provision between Britain and China (Merry & Zhao, 1998), researchers found that some children were seen as 'qualitatively different' (p. 215) from others and 'discriminative' language was used to describe them, which made western researchers feel rather uncomfortable. They also observed that there was almost no form of differentiation in classroom teaching, in spite of extra tutoring in a special class after school hours as a way of supporting children who were falling behind in academic learning.

Deng and Holdsworth (2007) evaluated 'Gansu Basic Education Projects' (1999-2005), which were conducted in rural areas in West China and supported by international and national consultants from Cambridge Education in the UK. Although a degree of attitudinal change took place, some deep-rooted views and practices were not transformed. They concluded that the project only showed limited impacts at the surface level, while the local culture with its social hierarchy and the competitive education system were immovable barriers to inclusion. They thus described the project as 'a stone thrown into calm water', implying that its effects would soon disappear over time.

Potts (2000) wrote about her ethnographic observation in two primary classrooms in Shanghai. Acknowledging her western perspective, she provided general descriptions of her visiting experience. She noted that there were obvious parallels between what the education system wanted to achieve in China and in the UK – namely, excellence and equity, which was insightful. However, it seemed that, because of being ‘shocked’ by the lack of autonomy and student-initiated activity in Chinese classrooms, she was distracted from her research focus on inclusion. Based on her very brief visits accompanied by a large group of people (including Chinese researchers, the headteacher and other school leaders, and a cameraman etc.), and without reflecting on the impacts of such an audience on teachers and pupils’ reactions, she asserted that the LRC-labelled child with Learning Difficulties that she observed was welcomed in the classroom. She also made no further comments on the provision of resource classrooms. In conclusion, she argued that ‘the absence of political and personal freedoms’ (p. 312) in China was the main obstacle to inclusion, a claim which was not linked to her data.

The crucial role of collaboration in achieving inclusive schools in China was highlighted by Malinen (2013), drawing on findings from a survey by herself and colleagues on Chinese teachers’ self-efficacy in relation to inclusive practice. At the same time, she warned that collaborative practice could play a part in limiting teachers’ autonomy when they wanted to adapt their instructions to children’s individual educational needs. However, being detached from or simply unfamiliar with everyday school life in China, she assumed that Chinese teachers had more free time than those in other countries like Finland, and thus suggested that such time would be better used for developing inclusive practice: a suggestion inconsistent with the busy schedule of Chinese teachers.

The most up-to-date inquiry into inclusion in Chinese regular schools that I am aware of is Tan’s (2014) investigation, which, it is claimed, is the first research to add a Chinese perspective to the international knowledge of inclusive education. He used the *Index for Inclusion* (Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughan & Shaw, 2000) to evaluate the barriers to the inclusion of SEN children in two regular schools in China through a case-study approach, covering five aspects including attitudes and

values, classroom management and class size, school leadership and collaboration, teacher education and physical environment. Mixed methods were used, including questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions and documents, involving a large number of participants – 785 pupils from an urban school, 128 pupils from a rural school, all their parents, and many teachers and headteachers. This research failed to offer any additional insights beyond restating the already known structural barriers in China such as insufficient teacher education or large class sizes, and it overlooked the impacts of LRC policy on school practice. The research is also problematic in many ways that threaten its validity.

First, although children's perceptions were sought, this research served very much as another example of research conducted about disabled children but without them: all people surrounding disabled children were invited to give their opinions. The research was entitled 'examining the barriers to inclusive education for students with special educational needs', but from start to finish it was not even stated how many disabled children were included, and the study seemed to conceal the fact that only a quite small number of children would be designated as SEN pupils in Chinese regular schools. Pupils were not included in interviews and only 4 pupils were allowed to participate in a focus group discussion, of which one was a disabled child. Disabled children's responses in questionnaires (if they did complete any) were not extracted or examined separately, so that their voices might easily have been 'drowned out' by those of the majority of children.

Second, it is inconsistent that, although the researcher chose his philosophical stance as interpretivism, he gave no attention to the way notions like disability or SEN were socially constructed as if they were children's inherent qualities, and further stated that the research findings were quality-assured for being objective and unbiased, with minimal influence from his own subjectivity.

Third, there was no adaptation of the *Index of Inclusion* in light of the contextual difference, a factor which Booth and Black-Hawkins (2001) had already warned about. For instance, Chinese teachers were asked how they supported children whose first language was not English. Such ignorance is commonly seen elsewhere when researchers use the term 'inclusive education' to seek teachers' views on the policy,

although many teachers in fact have never even heard of it (e.g. Feng, 2010). Finally, the researcher asserted that the principles of Confucianism and inclusive education were exactly the same, ignoring the way Confucius advocated maintaining the social hierarchy and perceived a person's ability to learn as intrinsic, innate and fixed.

In all, the existing research has shed some light on the overall reluctance to fully accept disabled children in regular schools in China. However, it has provided far less satisfactory insights into schooling practice in terms of LRC implementation. Most particularly, the 'included' disabled children's voices are completely absent: whether they experience inclusion or exclusion in regular schools is unknown. These children seem to be trapped between policies: on the one hand, the authority's agenda for ensuring a satisfying rate of 'inclusive' enrolment under international pressure; and on the other hand, the unquestioned promotion of special provision. Hence, there is a great need for research that, by embracing the complexity of school reality, could provide much deeper understanding of the current status of disabled children's learning and participation in Chinese regular schools, and of the inclusionary and exclusionary processes that underpin it. Most importantly, disabled children's voices must be heard in the debates about the relevant provision in Chinese classrooms and schools. In Chapter 3, I will further discuss the underlying reasons for the silence of disabled children's voices, and how listening to these voices could offer invaluable insights into inclusive practice and pedagogy.

## 2.4 Locating Shanghai

Given the distinctive regional variations in China, Lewin and Wang (1994) argued that no research could confidently provide a thorough representation of China. The current research is about gaining further insights into disabled children's learning and participation in Chinese regular schools, rather than making generalised claims. I chose Shanghai as the research site because I was familiar with its special education system and it was easier for me to gain access. Also, its unique context might generate interesting and pertinent data. Below are some notes to introduce the research context of Shanghai.

Shanghai is a rising global city located in East Asia (Ye, 2004; Yusuf & Wu, 2002). Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it has served as one of the major trading ports of China. Until 1943, a large part of Shanghai consisted of foreign concessions (mainly British and French). The almost one hundred years of colonial history resulted in a city of mixed Eastern and Western culture. Now Shanghai is one of the four municipalities in China (the other three being Beijing, Tianjin and Chongqing) which share the same administrative status as provinces featuring a high level of autonomy in governance. As the largest city in the country, Shanghai has a residential population of over 24 million, 9.9 million of whom are migrants<sup>21</sup>. With the support of local universities and the attractive working opportunities, around 22% of the residents hold university degrees and 1 in 50 residents holds a postgraduate degree (NBSC, 2010). Shanghai is the economic centre of Mainland China, with a GDP significantly exceeding the national average level (Shanghai Bureau of Statistics [ShBS], 2011).

Shanghai has been positioned at the forefront of educational reform in Mainland China since 1949 (Arens, 1952)<sup>22</sup>. It was the first city to implement 9-year compulsory education (5-year primary education and 4-year junior secondary education), and full coverage has been reached and maintained. As the ‘experimental field’, the policy and practice that prove effective in Shanghai are likely to be implemented in other areas at a later stage. Visitors from all over the country frequent Shanghai to learn about its educational initiatives and receive in-service training. For example, the national training centre for secondary schools’ headteachers is based at East China Normal University. The local government has declared a commitment to establishing an internationalised system (Shanghai Committee of Education [ShCoE], 2012), and international scholars and experts have been invited to join advisory boards for the city’s educational policy-making. The intensive knowledge exchange and collaboration with western countries and the academic support from local universities contribute to a modern image of Shanghai’s

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<sup>21</sup> The city has seen a division between Shanghai *hukou* residents and migrant residents. *Hukou* is the Chinese system of household registration, which results in a scenario of ‘immigration within a country’. Children from migrant families are granted rights to be enrolled in local schools. However, they are not entitled to the special educational service, which is funded by local government. In schools, migrant children tend to be vulnerable to prejudice and discrimination.

<sup>22</sup> There is no space here to describe the policy and practice of Shanghai’s education system in detail; a quite comprehensive and updated introduction can be found in Tan (2013).

education system. Since the publicity for Shanghai's performance in PISA 2009, its education system has become a new 'poster boy' (Sellar & Lingard, 2013).

While increasing the enrolment rate of compulsory education is still addressed in the recent national policy statement 'Mid-term and Long-term Plan of Education Reform (2010-2020)', Shanghai's local interpretation prioritises 'quality' over 'quantity' (ShCoE, 2010). Four goals are stressed in the local plan: advocating equity, pursuing excellence, promoting innovation and supporting development. 'Joyful education' (*Yukuai Jiaoyu*) was advocated to counter the long-standing high academic pressure on pupils.

According to Tan (2013), Shanghai's teachers adopted an approach of retaining traditional ways while exploring alternatives within its scope. Naftali's (2014) ethnographic research in Shanghai's schools offered some insights into the transformation of education in Shanghai. She felt that its schooling was moving towards a child-centred and neo-liberal approach. She found that both cognitive and emotional processes involved in learning had been stressed by practitioners. Children's individual interests seemed to be frequently addressed along with an emerging discourse of children's rights, although this was to some extent mediated in the prevailing culture of social hierarchy between adults and children.

Shanghai has reformed teachers' payment scheme to reward teachers who enable children to gain higher academic performance (except for LRC designated pupils). Tan's (2013) research showed how a headteacher regarded such a strategy as an 'invisible hand' (p. 24) directing teachers' practice towards what was desired in the school's vision. The overall emphasis on 'numbers' led Tan (2013) to the prevailing performance-driven culture in Shanghai's schools. The researcher argued that the mechanisms of performativity were well received by schools in Shanghai because of the long tradition of examinations in Chinese history, a culture of obedience to authority, and collectivism in Chinese society. The research found 'no evidence' of any negative impacts of performativity on teachers, which seems less plausible given the international research on this topic (e.g. Ball, 2003). This result might have emerged because schools and teachers tend to hold back certain information on the

grounds that, after all, the researcher, as an expert from another country, was visiting them only to learn about successful experiences.

Compared to other parts of the country, Shanghai has set up a more developed special education system. Shanghai would have been piloting and putting forward innovative initiatives years before the national policy underwent any change. For example, the notion of ‘inclusive education’ was adopted in its local policy framework three years ahead of the revision of national policy (ShCoE, 2010). The number of special schools has stopped growing (29 in total by 2013) and their student population is stable (ShBS, 2011, 2014). The first city-level Special Education Resource Centre in China was opened to provide professional support for teachers and families of disabled children. In line with the city’s overall aspiration, Shanghai claimed that its special education system was also expected to be ‘internationalised and modernised’ through its ‘3-year Action Plan of Special Education (2009-2011)’ (ShCoE, 2009). The city has seen the introduction of a western model of practice, such as formulating IEPs for SEN children, opening resource classrooms and allocating touring guidance teachers.

Special Education Guidance Centres (SEGCs), based in special schools, act as the centre of the governing system for implementing LRC in Shanghai. Touring guidance teachers from SEGCs would visit regular schools on a regular basis. The ‘expert’ group is made up of personnel from educational administration, the health sector, schools and academia, to oversee the designation of LRC pupils and regular schools’ practices. Within a regular school, besides the appointment of one resource teacher, the management team is formed of a deputy headteacher and a special educational coordinator.

## 2.5 Summary

In this chapter, I have introduced relevant contextual knowledge for this research. I noted that Chinese education was going through a period of reforming and gradually shifting its agenda to address both quality and equity in education. The examination of issues on disability and special education in China showed the dominant position of the medical model of disability and the absence of criticism of the negative

impacts of segregated education. Although LRC is seen by some researchers to be a Chinese inclusive education policy, my analysis showed how the country's policy change was rather a response to local and global pressure, and that there were several issues that furthered the gap between LRC and inclusive education. Through reviewing available research on the implementation of LRC, I argued that no research had offered sufficient insights into the complex process involved in negotiating disabled children's inclusion in regular schools; in particular, disabled children's views and experiences of schooling had been given no consideration. Shanghai was chosen as a suitable and informative research site for its position at the forefront of Chinese educational reform.





## **Chapter 3 Inclusive education and pupil voice**

### **3.1 Introduction**

LRC has been gradually framed into a Chinese policy of inclusive education. However, the critical analysis of its policy and implementation showed that it was unclear whether the inclusion of disabled children was being effectively promoted. Disabled children's views on and experiences of the current provision in regular schools were identified as a significant gap in knowledge. In this chapter, I will introduce the theoretical framework for this research based on a literature review of perspectives from inclusive education, pupil voice, disability studies and childhood studies. In section 3.2, I first examine the meaning of inclusive education and the key debates that are relevant to the current inquiry. In section 3.3, I continue to discuss the importance of listening to pupils' voices and the issues involved. Section 3.4 explores potential implications of pupil voice for developing inclusive practice, and what could be learned from a growing body of inclusive education research that highlights children's perspectives. I also note that teachers' voices should not be sidelined when children are listened to. This chapter concludes by setting out my research questions.

### **3.2 'Unpacking' inclusive education**

The term 'inclusive education' has become a global 'buzzword' in education policies. According to Kozleski et al. (2011), the countries that participated in the movement for inclusive education could be loosely grouped into two generations: countries like the US and the UK played leading roles, while other developing countries joined in much later due to economic and political circumstances.

The notion of inclusive education also travelled to China and gained growing significance mainly after 1994 with the publication of the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (UNESCO, 1994). It has seen a constant evolution of China's policy framework regarding disabled children's rights to education as a response to international advocacy, in statements such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), the Education for All and Millennium Development Goals (UN,

2000; UNESCO, 1990), the Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000), the EFA Flagship on the Right to Education for Persons with Disabilities (UNESCO, 2004), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006). Nevertheless, as discussed in section 2.3.3.2, a consistent and clear definition of inclusive education in China is lacking. Leaving the concept wide open for interpretation could result in the co-existence of exclusionary practices in the name of inclusion.

Turning to the key texts on inclusive education, which have mostly been generated in Northern contexts (Miles & Ahuja, 2007), the conceptualisation of inclusive education, while showing a certain degree of shared aspiration, is indeed highly contested, ambiguous, elastic and hard to define by its own nature (Barton, 1997; Dyson, Jones & Kerr, 2011; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Lindsay, 2003; Norwich, 2013; Slee, 2011). Kozleski et al. (2011) stated that inclusive education ‘has meant anything from physical integration of students with disabilities in general education classrooms to the transformation of curricula, classrooms, and pedagogies, and even the transformation of entire educational systems’ (p. 3). Ainscow et al. (2006) detailed the possible ways of thinking about inclusive education as being related to ‘a concern with disabled students and others categorised as having special educational needs’, ‘a response to disciplinary exclusion’, ‘inclusion in relation to all groups seen as being vulnerable to exclusion’, ‘developing the school for all’, ‘education for all’ or ‘a principled approach to education and society’ (p. 15). More recently, Norwich (2013) summarised the common themes and characteristics of inclusive education as: ‘accepting/valuing/extending scope to all; not leaving anyone out; school reorganisation/problem-solving organisation; promoting fraternity; enhancing equal opportunity; listening to unfamiliar voice/empowering; active participation in school life; a road without end; not an end in itself but a means to inclusive society’ (p. 3).

Because the meaning of the term depends on who is using it for what purpose and in what context, it is not surprising to find that ‘inclusive education research’ is underpinned by an extremely broad range of theoretical, political and disciplinary stances. Clough and Corbett (2000) drew on the chronological process of the

evolving discourse on inclusive education and set out five frameworks: psychology-medicine, sociology, curricular approaches, school improvement strategies and disability studies. Slee (2011) also located discourses of inclusive education along a disciplinary spectrum from sociological to pedagogical perspectives: sociological research concerning the underlying assumptions, constructions and structures for exclusion, which are seen as critical to the enactment of inclusive education, while pedagogical research stresses the re-construction of everyday educational practice to minimise exclusion and enhance pupils' achievement and participation. Nevertheless, Dyson (2000) argued that although multiple theoretical positions had been involved in the debates about inclusive education, it would be of little help if discourses were merely seen as competing with each other, the point of which is especially relevant today given the emergence of interdisciplinary research. He thus suggested that the existing discourses of inclusive education should be sorted along two interactive dimensions – the *rationale* for inclusion and the *realisation* of inclusion – which I also consider to be very useful.

While the movement for integration might contribute to the increasing physical presence of disabled children in regular settings, it has been criticised as a reorganisation of the special education system (Vislie, 2003) and a distraction from the inadequacy of regular education (Fulcher, 1989). Inclusive education aims to surpass integration, representing a radical redirection of educational development (Vislie, 2003). To better differentiate between the concepts of integration and inclusive education, Armstrong and Barton (2007) argued that integration was about the 'technical and administrative arrangements' for some children to attend mainstream schools (p. 10). Disabled children are expected to be assimilated and normalised by the existing structures and practices; even if some organisational and pedagogical adjustments are in place, they are only devised with reference to the identified children (Armstrong & Barton, 2007; Barton, 1997). By contrast, inclusive education aims to reform the public education system rather than re-regulating the special education system (Lipsky & Gartner, 2000). In other words, it is the provision in regular schools that should be transformed in response to student diversity. Within an inclusive school, children's individual differences are valued and celebrated rather than classed as difficulties (Barton, 1997), so that all children

from the community will be welcome, regardless of their differences (Armstrong & Barton, 2007).

At first glance, the explicit commitment to enhancing the presence, participation and achievement of all learners, and removing barriers to learning and participation, seems to be hardly disputable in its strong sense of moral rightness. However, at both theoretical and practical levels, the unpacking of such a blueprint for education could involve countless discussions, arguments and disagreements on issues of *where*, *which* children should be educated and *how*. After all, can the ideal of inclusive education be realised or it is just another utopian concept? In what follows, in order to approach a theoretical understanding of inclusive education in this research, I will examine several key issues in the debates.

### 3.2.1 Inclusion concerning all or some?

The notion of inclusive education reaffirms a common wish of modern education that every child's opportunity to access education should be promoted. However, there have been debates over whether inclusive education is indeed equivalent to 'education for all' or whether it should be more concerned with the inclusion of some children who are already vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion in the education system.

Research that focuses on a certain group of children (such as disabled children in this inquiry) could be questioned as inevitably reproducing categorical thinking about diversity and the exclusionary beliefs and practices such thinking entails. The wish to avoid this pitfall might be why in recent years, as Norwich (2013) observed, discussion of inclusive education seems to have become more and more likely to stress the idea of 'all', distancing itself from the specific circumstances of disability and difficulties.

Nevertheless, I need to point out that, given the self-reproduction of exclusionary processes, any initiative aimed at 'all' pupils without emphasising 'some' might very soon reflect the actual state of inequity. For example, a research setting out to gain all children's views might result in the silence of disabled children. If not specifically eliciting these voices, some children's experiences and the impacts of potential

exclusionary provision could be readily left in the shadows. Researchers have also argued that the EFA movement, which was aligned with the aim of inclusive education to expand universal access, overlooked the dispute about where a disabled child should receive inclusive education, since segregated institutions were still acknowledged and legitimised as acceptable educational provision for this group of children (Miles & Ahuja, 2007; Miles & Singal, 2010). Within the discourse of 'all', disabled children's interests could be sidelined when other issues tended to gain more attention, such as those concerned with gender or socio-economic class interests (Miles & Singal, 2010).

Furthermore, the deep-rooted history of segregated education for disabled children, the rationale for which still prevails, cannot be simply ignored when conceptualising inclusive education. It is important to recognise the ongoing social and political struggle experienced by disabled people to gain equal rights to participation, and to acquire the knowledge produced through such movements. In her writing on the contribution to inclusive education made by the sociology of disability, Allan (2010) highlighted the duties that an inclusive education researcher should undertake in order to advance the struggle, by foregrounding views of disabled children and their families on what would make a real difference to them and how.

Therefore, if inclusive and exclusionary processes need to be examined simultaneously for a nuanced understanding of inclusive education (Barton, 1997; Booth, 1996; Booth & Ainscow, 1998; Dyson, 2000), I argue that inclusive education should always fulfill the agenda of 'all and some' to promote all children's learning and participation while not overlooking the marginalisation and exclusion faced by some vulnerable groups. In China, disabled children constitute the only group of children whose exclusion from regular provision is legitimised. Thus researching this group of children would not contribute any less to the knowledge of inclusive education in China but also express its necessity and urgency. Their voices should be highlighted to avoid being muted among those of 'all pupils', as happened in Tan's (2014) research.

### 3.2.2 The continuity of exclusion

Although inclusive education has been advocated for many years, it is undeniable that, even in countries with a somewhat longer history of promoting inclusion in education, segregation, marginalisation and exclusion are still taking place. How to make sense of the continuity of exclusion?

First, it might be due to the excessive and uncritical application of the term ‘inclusive education’ so as to mean almost anything in policy and practice, justified by the notion of serving the ‘best interests’ of disabled/SEN children. Inclusive education may become an empty concept shaped by values and agendas of different powerful interest groups (Armstrong & Barton, 2007). Thus, even when an ‘inclusive education’ policy is implemented, removing barriers to inclusion might not be the main concern. For instance, in China, special schools are legitimised provision within the ‘inclusive’ system (MoE & CNC-UNESCO, 2008). Srivastava, Boer and Pijl (2015) argued that more research was needed to evaluate effects and outcomes at school and classroom level in spite of the change in policies.

Second, the superficial usage of the term ‘inclusive education’ could mean that the causes of marginalisation and exclusion in education are left unexamined. On the one hand, as Slee and Allan (2001) noted, special educational practices which reinforced exclusion were seen to be replicating and reproducing themselves, only in different forms. A notion like ‘SEN’ might thus be used purely as a substitute for other terms, since it sounds less discriminatory but could still imply the same pathological thinking, as found in the medical model of disability. On the other hand, even if certain changes are made to the form of provision, for example by removing segregated settings, this would not necessarily disrupt the underlying exclusionary values, beliefs and practices that are already deeply rooted in the modern education system (Armstrong, 2003). Taking England as an example, Armstrong and Barton (2007) pointed out that its education system had long been mostly about ‘measuring, sorting, selection and rejection’ in which some pupils and schools were ‘good’ and some others were ‘failures’ (p. 7). Florian (2008) drew on the ‘bell curve’ concept and argued that in the real world of schooling, systems were widely structured in a utilitarian way and organised around the belief that intelligence was ‘fixed,

measurable and normally distributed', with the result that children at the tail end tended to be seen as 'different' and in need of additional or special support (p. 203). Greenstein's (2016) analysis presented the modern education system as a battleground of division and stratification serving the needs of the neo-liberal market. According to Slee (2004), it seemed that schools were never meant for everyone, given the prevailing systematic exclusionary process within the overall education system.

Furthermore, what makes it worse is that the resistance to inclusive education could be reinforced by its seemingly not-so-successful implementation in schools. For example, in Warnock's reflection on the development of inclusion since the 1978 Warnock report, she used the 'evidence' of exclusion of children in regular schools to argue that maybe the idea of inclusion was totally wrong and some children only belonged in special institutions (Warnock, 2010). Similarly, many researchers into special education still believe that some children cannot be taught in regular schools because of practical needs (e.g. Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2012). Glazzard (2014) claimed that inclusion had negative effects on schools and practitioners by requiring them to meet performance targets. He wrote that 'inclusion was working for these children but the teachers in the school were paying the price' (p. 33), a judgement which failed to challenge the dominant performative culture in which many children were already marginalised. Farrell (2006) strongly criticised the view that children's access to good education was at risk when options of special schools were narrowed because inclusion was politically correct.

Although I also feel hesitant about the forced placement of disabled children in unwelcoming regular schools to serve a political agenda, I argue that such a 'choice' is more of a compromise when exclusionary practices are still dominant in regular education. The 'choices' of parents and disabled children are not real choices at all; thus they should not be used as justification for the existence of special education (Slee, 2011). As argued by Slee (2011), the challenge for researchers was precisely the issues arising in practice, because inclusion surely demanded more of schooling than the physical presence of disabled children. Using the 'maladministration' of inclusive education to violate its principles was itself problematic enough. In



addition, highlighting only some limited ‘choices’ has deliberately ignored disabled people’s longing for recognition, belongingness and participation, and their experiences of shame, discrimination and stigma associated with being positioned as unwanted in society. Therefore, I would warn educators that evidence of continuing exclusion should not be interpreted as justifying claims for the ‘meaninglessness’ of inclusive education and the ‘impossibility’ of an alternative approach. Instead, it actually reminds us of the obstacles and barriers that need to be overcome.

### 3.2.3 Differences, dilemmas and tensions

Inclusive education still seems to be at the margins of mainstream education, and Thomas (2013) noted that this was because of its historical roots in special education: when inclusive education is mentioned, there ‘is an instinct to expect and to identify difference and disability’ (p. 475). The recognition of human difference is closely associated with individualism, which is reflected in a general belief that every child has unique interests, learning styles, needs and wants that should be respected and catered to. Inclusive education should embrace the recognition of individual differences (Florian, 2008; Thomas & Loxley, 2007). However, mass education in modern times aims at educating all children in a similar way – the ‘recognisably common’ (Dyson, 2005: 74). Implementing inclusive education, according to Dyson (2005), could thus be perceived as a means of resolving the fundamental dilemma of difference vs. commonality. To theorise inclusive education, compared to all other kinds of ideal prospects, is to directly engage with the issue of how human difference is understood and responded to in education.

Globally, it has become a normative practice in modern education systems to label and categorise some pupils as ‘special’; nevertheless, one of the intractable problems for such practice is the ‘dilemma of difference’, which was described by Norwich (2013) as the tension between ‘protecting or assuring suitable provision for a vulnerable minority and the negative effects of labeling or categories’ (p. 65). In line with Dyson (2005), Norwich argued that such tension was underlined by two stances: the differentiation stance, focusing on children’s significant differences and adapting teaching accordingly, which might lead to separation, devaluation and stigma; and the commonality stance, stressing a suitable ordinary schooling model which might

involve overlooking provision for individuals' specific needs. Drawing on his research in three countries, the UK, the US and Netherlands, he found that the dilemma of difference had been widely experienced by policy-makers and practitioners over issues around the identification of SEN pupils, curriculum commonality-differentiation and common-separate educational settings. Besides the dilemma of difference, he noted that tensions of autonomy-control and the philosophical dilemmas of ontology and epistemology were also involved in inclusive education. He claimed that his approach to research and knowledge was more on the 'conservative' side compared to a transformational stance, and considered that to be more faithful to the truth and to pluralism in values (p. 163).

Although researchers tend to acknowledge the prevalent experiences of the dilemma of difference, some have pointed out the limitations of such an approach in theorising inclusive education. Florian (2005, 2007) found the dilemmatic approach unacceptable, and Slee (2011) also offered the criticism that compromise would thus be seen as embodied and inevitable in inclusive education, a belief which would not transform the relations of inequality. I share similar views. Whilst Norwich (2013) challenged 'inclusionists' for a lack of follow-up solutions, his own approach also seemed to offer little in terms of possible ways of handling, negotiating and moving forward from the problem; rather leaving the advancement of knowledge of special and inclusive education stuck in the dilemma of difference (Florian, 2005). Also, because any policy and practice that leads to 'unwanted' consequences could draw on the inevitability of the dilemma of difference as an easy justification, the dilemmatic approach conveys a sense of indifference to the inequality and inequity faced by children in education. The 'settlement' of the dilemma of difference might not constitute a solution in its own sense (Clark, Dyson, Millward & Robson, 1999). Hence, the dilemmatic theory is not sufficient for inclusive education for its act of 'looping the loop': even supposing that it could help to some extent to raise awareness of the complexity of the process, it is likely to restrict the imagination when considering what inclusive education provision could be and how else it could be enacted. Seeing dilemmas almost as objects and concrete entities could result in failure to question why the experiences underlying dilemmas emerge in the first place.

Another issue that has been gaining more and more significance in the implementation of inclusive education is where the agenda of inclusion stands when education and its principles are increasingly driven by marketisation. As we enter the era of global comparison of and competition over children's performance, as measured, for example, by PISA, raising standards and improving performance have become the theme in many countries' educational reform policies. A persistent concern is that the fierce competition imposed on pupils means that some are doomed to lose (Barton, 1997; Greenstein, 2016; Rouse & Florian, 1997), a situation at odds with the goal of inclusive education. Booth (1999) argued that the selective approach to raise standards should be replaced by the comprehensive ideal of inclusion, which encompasses all educational development.

Ball (2003) theorised the performative school culture as the one that 'employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)' (p. 216). He considered it to be detrimental to education, since everything was driven by the production of measurable performances, giving rise to a loss of meaningfulness in teachers' practice. He warned that in such a culture, the agenda of inclusion would only appear redundant. His recent analysis (2013) continued to underline that the children whose perceived 'ability' could not be articulated by performance were classified and labelled as 'special' and vulnerable to exclusion in a performative system.

Based on an analysis of policy reform in England and Wales, Rouse and Florian (1997) emphasised the rising risks of exclusion for SEN children in a climate wherein academic excellence, choice and competition were pursued: these children might be seen as 'at best irrelevant, or at worst an encumbrance' to the survival of schools in league tables (p. 328). They identified seven groups of tensions between the underpinning principles of market-based reforms and the development of inclusive education: 'inclusion-exclusion, equity-excellence, producers-consumers, choice-planning, entitlement-differentiation, altruism-self-interest and individuals-groups' (p. 332). Barton (1997) argued that in such a climate individualism was celebrated, leading to increasing selection, differentiation and commitment to

measurable outcomes. He warned that marketisation in education was threatening because it seemed to contradict the vision of an inclusive society.

Armstrong (2003) also stressed that marketisation left little space for considerations of social justice, and an examination of consultation meetings over the closure of a special school showed that mainstream schools were under pressure to attract and teach ‘productive’ pupils for the sake of the league tables; thus disabled children were likely to be rejected because of the ‘threat’ they posed to standards or to other children’s learning. Although in Scotland, there has been an insistence on reconciling the agenda of performance and accountability with social justice and inclusion by including SEN children’s performances in mainstream schools’ outcome reports, such a strategy was of little help in valuing every child’s individual achievements while meeting middle-class parents’ preference for socially exclusive but ‘better’ schools (Riddell, 2006). Meadmore (2001) noted how the performative culture was formed in primary schooling in Australia, and its effect of further marginalising pupils who were already vulnerable to exclusion in the mainstream system. The vigorous process of marketisation in education on a global scale, which might increase disabled children’s marginalisation and exclusion, seems to be extremely hard to counterbalance.

Black-Hawkins, Florian and Rouse’s (2007) research provided a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between achievement and inclusion. They noted that raising standards sometimes could act as a strategy to enhance equity of achievement between students and schools. Remaining critical of a simplistic view of achievement as constituting academic performance in tests and exams, the researchers found that some schools seemed to be coping well with the agendas both of achievement and of inclusion: the two agendas, with the tensions and dilemmas arising from them, were understood not as absolute opposites but as compatible. Such insights are useful for informing theorisation of inclusive education that can not only promote equality and equity but also promote children’s achievements.

In different countries and jurisdictions, there could be varied policies and practices for managing the place of the inclusion agenda in the performative culture. For instance, in Scotland, SEN pupils’ performances are counted in schools’ reports, but

in Shanghai, LRC pupils' performances are omitted from the record in schools' league tables (at primary level). There has been no research examining how disabled children's inclusion is negotiated in Shanghai's regular schools – an undoubtedly top-performing education system.

### 3.2.4 Enacting inclusion in practice

One of the important premises of the need to implement inclusive education is that inclusive processes within schools are also part of broader social change towards an inclusive society (Barton, 1997); the two worlds are not separated, independent and detached from each other. Through systemic and attitudinal changes, inclusive conditions, relations and values can be created (Armstrong & Barton, 2007). I also recognise the connection between day-to-day changes in classrooms and the transformation of society; however, the analysis of structural barriers to inclusive education seems less helpful in telling schools and teachers what they should do (Allan, 2010; Dyson, Howes & Roberts, 2002). The failure to provide effective guidance for practitioners could add to the scepticism about inclusive education as merely rhetorical and incapable of realisation in practice.

Fulcher (1989) argued that the first item on the agenda for inclusion should be instituting a discourse about pedagogy and teaching. Florian (2008) stated that to give meaning to inclusion, inclusive practice should be the focus: that is, what people do in schools. I also argue that the development of inclusive practice is particularly important for supporting disabled children's learning, so as to challenge the belief that their difficulties in learning are solely derived from their impairments. Learning needs to be understood as a sociocultural process; as Thomas (2013) asserted: 'if context is wrong, learning doesn't happen' (p. 477). Thus there is a great need for researchers to construct patterns of inclusive practice in classrooms and schools.

Similar to the contested term 'inclusive education', 'inclusive practice' also has been used to mean many different things, as noted by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011), who observed that relocating specialist provision from special schools to mainstream schools might be defined as inclusive practice, along with responding to learner diversity without drawing on categorisation. They argued that much confusion could

arise over what should be seen as good practice, what evidence counts in identifying it, and how we can know about it.

There has never been a shortage of writings on ‘inclusive practice’, much of which has been criticised as ‘superficial guidelines’ (Allan, 2010). This material is often in the form of a checklist, implying that once a teacher follows the descriptions, his/her practice will necessarily promote inclusion at a deeper level. Educational practice is thus seen as a purely technical issue, which assumes a causal relationship between behaviour and outcome, ignoring the fact that educational practice is inherently a social, cultural and political issue involving complex negotiation of decisions over *who* gets *what* education *how* and *where*. Booth and Ainscow (2002) argued that a single set of inclusive practices applicable to all schools simply did not exist. In other words, what seems to be working in one school might have negative impacts in another. The varied circumstances across educational settings, which are embedded in social and cultural contexts, should not be ignored in formulating inclusive strategies. There are two main strands of more robust academic research into inclusive practice.

One of the main strands of inclusive practice research has its focus on school improvement – enhancing a school’s capacity to respond to all children’s needs through organisational change. Schools are seen as institutions with a certain degree of autonomy, and the negotiation of inclusion could happen either within the organisation or between a school and its external context (Ainscow et al., 2006). The general principles of inclusive schools are proposed as: ‘...the removal of structural barriers between different groups of students and staff, the dismantling of separate programmes, services and specialisms, and the development of pedagogical approaches ... which enable students to learn together ...’ (p. 40). Inclusive culture is affirmed as one of the agendas for developing inclusive schools: children’s educational difficulties are perceived as an opportunity to improve practice; collaboration between staff is promoted; and a general consensus of inclusive values is shared (Ainscow et al., 2006). In keeping with these propositions, *Index for Inclusion* (Booth et al., 2000) was developed as an instrument of school’s self-improvement through evaluation of the existing ‘culture, policy and practice’ in the

schools, in addition to action taken to challenge exclusionary practices. However, portraying school change as an organisational issue has been criticised for its simplistic view of educational processes (Clark et al., 1999).

Integrating inclusive education in a school's improvement agenda is surely important. Meanwhile, teachers' autonomy and power should also be recognised as making a difference in classrooms through countless decisions about what and how a child should learn, and who should or should not have opportunities to participate. I am not arguing that teachers' beliefs and assumptions can be totally disassociated from the overall school ethos. Nevertheless, I believe that individual teachers are able to exercise their agency so as to negotiate children's learning and participation.

In the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the pedagogy for inclusion was introduced as a 'student-centred' approach, which urged regular teachers to make adjustments to meet the needs of SEN children. According to its framework, children should be seen as their own agency of learning, actively constructing knowledge, while a teacher's role is transformed into that of facilitator. It has seen a change in classroom structures, as in the increasing deployment of peer tutoring, group learning and self-assessment (Byra, 2006). Although such an approach could to some extent challenge the traditional belief that teachers are the knowers who transmit curriculum knowledge to children, I tend to agree with Norwich (2000) that it might be of less help in avoiding the reproduction of exclusion. In the discourse of the student-centred approach, a disabled child's 'needs' are still seen as his/her inherent traits, a view which underplays the social processes in constructing 'needs' in an education system. Thus when teachers make additional or special arrangements for these children, the provision could be readily justified by a discourse of 'meeting needs', which continues to pathologise children and fails to acknowledge the potentially negative impacts of special treatment.

If we attempt to use the term 'inclusive' to define a certain kind of pedagogy that is distinct from student-centred or special educational discourse, what would it be and how could teachers approach it in their daily practice? We have seen the development of a more potent conceptualisation of inclusive pedagogy as an alternative (e.g. Black-Hawkins, 2014; Florian, 2014; Florian & Black-Hawkins,

2011). This body of work is built on the *Learning without limits* (Hart, Dixon, Drummond & McIntyre, 2004) project, which explored a group of teachers' beliefs and practices that rejected ability-labelling, and found that three principles. 'co-agency, everybody and trust', were central to the transformation of children's learning capacity. Also, the *Framework for Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) is used to present the structure of how inclusion is understood. The framework was originally developed as a research tool to examine issues around achievement and inclusion in schools. Three elements – 'access, collaboration and diversity' – were firstly addressed (Black-Hawkins et al., 2007), and later the element of 'achievement' was added to examine teachers' pedagogical practices in classrooms (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

As mentioned above, the traditional way of enhancing inclusion was construed as differentiating the curriculum or introducing extra provision for SEN pupils (Lewis, 1995). Underpinned by the assumption that 'special' children must be educated in a special way, a lack of 'special education expertise' has been frequently used by schools as the reason for excluding some children (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Instead, the development of inclusive pedagogy is based on different propositions, such as 'shifting the focus from one that is concerned with only those individuals who have been identified as having "additional needs" to the learning of all children in the community of the classroom; rejecting deterministic beliefs about ability as being fixed and the associated idea that the presence of some will hold back the progress of others and seeing difficulties in learning as professional challenges for teachers, rather than deficits in learners, that encourage the development of new ways of working' (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011: 818-9). Inclusive pedagogy thus could serve as a new way for teachers to respond to individual differences by 'providing for all' without 'differentiating for some' (p. 826). Such an approach has significant implications for initial teacher training (Florian & Linklater, 2010; Florian & Rouse, 2009).

For this research, I also draw on the *Framework for Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) to inform the examination of inclusive and exclusionary processes in regular schools. I consider the framework as especially relevant for the Shanghai



context, in which the tension between academic excellence and equity could not be more obvious. Also, adopting the framework should facilitate a better understanding of existing inclusive practice and pedagogy exercised by Chinese teachers, which has implications that foreground a sense of hope in light of the resistance to disabled children that prevails in regular schools. In section 4.3.1, I will further discuss how the framework was used as a research tool to inform the collection and analysis of data, how it was adapted to the research focus of listening to pupil voice, and the evaluation of its effectiveness.

### 3.2.5 Inclusive education in international contexts

For each education system, the barriers to inclusion and the ways of approaching it could be different. While some countries are still struggling with gaining resources for daily survival and providing children with any form of education (Booth, 1999), in some other countries policy-makers are debating how to distribute apparently sufficient resources. In some countries, raising standards is the priority in education reform, while this is not the case for others. In countries like China state schools are the main institutions, but some other countries might rely on NGOs or international organisations to provide educational opportunities (Srivastava et al., 2015). In many developing countries, the main debates on disabled children's inclusion could also show a discrepancy with those in developed countries (due to such factors as lack of medical knowledge and practice with disability or the absence of teaching assistants in classrooms). In Srivastava et al.'s (2015) review of inclusive education research focusing on developing countries, they noted that the ways of implementing inclusive education were remarkably diverse, though many countries had made policy revisions following international advocacy. Peters (2003) argued that differing challenges and issues exist in Northern and Southern contexts as regards implementing inclusive education.

Most analysis of inclusive education, exclusion and SEN, however, is derived from the historical context of Northern countries. For many other countries like China, as I discussed in Chapter 2, it involves an interactive process between the international notion of inclusive education and local circumstances. I tend to reject a clear hierarchy in the status of inclusive education that researchers often imply, between

Northern/Western/developed contexts and the rest of the world – often referred to as global or international contexts. For example, Kozleski et al. (2011) suggested that the knowledge of inclusive education was more advanced in Northern countries, which others needed to follow. D. Armstrong, A.C. Armstrong and Spandagou (2011) claimed that inclusive education had encountered failure in a globalised world, as if this represented other countries’ ‘problems’ in being unable to understand and adopt some ideal model of provision. Such views not only ignore the persistence of exclusion in Northern countries, but also risk conceptualising inclusive education as a pre-determined model of practice that should be uncritically imposed on other contexts. Therefore, I stress the notion of ‘learning from each other’: lessons and experiences of how inclusion is negotiated in international contexts could have much to contribute to knowledge of inclusive education. It is not the aim of this research to offer any complete review of the global development of inclusive education. Here I will introduce some perspectives that are relevant to this inquiry.

First, in international contexts, it is not uncommon to see a merely rhetorical change of policies standing in for adoption of inclusive education. Sawhney’s (2015) case study of two private ‘inclusive schools’ in India found that the notion of inclusion was only adopted by schools to fit the trend, without the introduction of structural changes to achieve a wider student diversity; children with better academic performance still seemed to be privileged and more welcomed by schools. Similarly, as discussed in Chapter 2, there remains a question as to whether the re-framing of the policy discourse of LRC did actually promote the inclusion of disabled children in regular schools.

Second, we cannot ignore the way issues like economy, development, democracy and human rights play their part in the social conditions for inclusive education. For example, in countries like the UK, there is a strong emphasis on the right of choice of educational provision, a right which involves parents and children in the decision-making process, whilst in countries like Ghana, as argued by Singal, Salifu, Iddrisu, Casely-Hayford and Lundebye (2015), choices over which type of schools disabled children could attend were often not made by families or children, but depended on the availability of special schools and the various ‘push-and-pull’ factors within

mainstream schools. In addition, in countries where a child's educational prospects are seen as extremely important for the family's material and social wellbeing (Singal et al., 2015), the pursuit of academic performance is prominent. For example in China, teachers and parents are highly committed to children's education, which is reflected in the tremendous investment in it of time, effort and finance. The strong link between academic success and social mobility clearly reinforces the pressure for children to survive the competition at any price. Nevertheless, it has been argued that the highly competitive education systems in many developing countries seemed to jeopardise the inclusion of children with high support needs (Sharma, Forlin, Deppeler & Yang, 2013).

Third, cultural values can also play a role in shaping the space for inclusion. Corbett (1999) compared the values of cultural cohesion and community in Asian schools and the more individualistic values in British schools. LeTendre and Shimizu (2000) gave two very different accounts of their field visits to a Japanese mainstream school. Through reflecting on each other's views, they noted how 'difference' is constructed differently in American and Japanese societies. They suggested that while western societies were promoting inclusion by finding space for 'community', in the eastern societies where 'living together' was already the norm, space was being sought for the 'individual'. This research not only showed how the interpretation of inclusion was gained through a researcher's lens, but also offered very interesting insights into how the tension between collective and individual needs played out in different contexts. For China, collective needs also tend to be seen as more important than individual needs. However, it is problematic to quickly judge which values are more helpful for the development of inclusive education. Indeed, the notion of community could sometimes have the oppressive effect of excluding individuals' voices (Greenstein, 2016).

Fourth, researchers have also warned that simply copying models of practice from Northern/Western/developed countries in developing contexts could even have disruptive consequences (Srivastava et al., 2015; Thomas, 2013). Ignoring the social context that the policy of inclusive education is suited to will only result in ineffective implementation (Armstrong et al., 2011). Fanu's (2013) research in the

South-western Pacific showed how the direct implementation of western ‘inclusive education’ programmes by international development agencies, showing little consideration of local realities, might have adverse impacts. Singal and Muthukrishna (2014) argued that the naive transfer of toolkits or indexes developed in a Northern context was ‘disempowering’ by its detachment from local conditions (p. 7). They warned that constructing an overall unfavourable image of disabled people in the South would only contribute to the message that Northern scholars and agencies were carrying out ‘enlightened’ or ‘civilising’ work to ‘help’ other societies (p. 2). Dependency could also be reinforced through the export of these methods (Armstrong et al., 2011). In China, the implementation of LRC is also introducing western practices into Chinese schools. The assumption is that applying ‘advanced’ strategies such as opening resource classrooms for disabled children would guarantee the achievement of inclusion. However, this assumption lacks critical examination of its impacts on the everyday schooling process and disabled children’s experiences.

I am not defending problematic practices in a spirit of relativism or denying that common patterns of educational processes can be shared across contexts. My point is that local variations should not be ignored in the discussion of how to universalise inclusive education at a global level. My own perspective on how we design research and how to advocate inclusive education in developing contexts has changed, an experience which is shared by other researchers (e.g. Singal & Muthukrishna, 2014). I argue that conducting research that sets out only to criticise the provision and perspectives in Chinese regular schools from a dominant western perspective, such as that of Potts (2000), is an ‘easy’ option but is not helpful. It is even more important for research to explore the possibilities for local communities to move forward through understanding inclusive and exclusionary schooling processes within classrooms and schools (Clark et al., 1999).

### 3.3 Positioning pupil voice

In Chapter 2, I pointed out that, compared to a large body of research on teachers’ perceptions of the implementation of LRC in China, little research had examined children’s views and experiences of the provision in regular schools. Nonetheless, the marginalised position of children’s voices in the discussion of inclusive

education is not limited to China. Researchers argue that in developing or southern contexts, children's perspectives on inclusive education are largely missing while teachers and parents' views are more likely to be sought (Singal & Muthukrishna, 2014; Srivastava et al., 2015; Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014). In northern contexts also, children are rarely heard (Gibson, 2006), though researchers have frequently advocated that children's perspectives should not be overlooked in the knowledge production of inclusive education (Allan, 2010; Barton, 2012; Carpenter & McConkey, 2012; Davis & Watson, 2000; Lewis & Porter, 2007). Indeed, the silence of children's voices is almost taken for granted. When Fulcher (1989) articulated the need to invite every social actor into the arena of negotiation, an awareness of social relations was clearly expressed: professionals could display excessive power to decide what was best for pupils, whereas any service for human beings should be constructed by those being served. However, only policy-makers, teachers and parents were mentioned as decision-makers, and the role of pupils in the process was ambiguously left out of the discussion. Even in the field of disability studies, disabled children tend to be given much less attention, as though the social model of disability were only relevant for disabled adults (Connors & Stalker, 2007). It seems that pupils are still perceived as passively receiving whatever is given by adults in schools, without influencing the provision by voicing their views and needs.

To understand and represent the current status of disabled children's learning and participation in Shanghai's regular schools, I consider that it is essential to include and promote disabled children's voices in this research. As Masson (2004) asserted, any account of schooling was doomed to be deficient if it did not involve children's perspectives. How can we be confident that our means of applying the notion of inclusive education can truly transform children's lives if we don't consult them? After all, shouldn't the principle of inclusion be realised in a research study about it?

### 3.3.1 Children as being and becoming

Children's right to participation was advocated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), which stated that children should have a say in the decisions

that may affect their lives, beyond the traditional agenda of protection<sup>23</sup>.

Traditionally, however, children tend to be seen as ‘incompetent, unreliable and incomplete’ humans (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). In this sense, schooling is constructed as an instrument to facilitate a process of children becoming more cognitively and socially capable and moving from dependency to independence in their relations with adults, in a linear and staged manner underpinned by a psychological discourse of development. Children can only be waiting to acquire knowledge through education as part of the process of becoming adults (Greenstein, 2016). The implication is that until they reach adulthood, children’s views are decidedly invalid, biased, irrational and false, and thus not worth taking seriously: only adults are competent to make the right decisions about what is in children’s best interests.

The understanding of children as ‘becoming’ has been powerfully interrogated since the emergence of the new childhood sociology (Lawson, 2010), according to which the notion of childhood is seen as socially constructed (Tisdall, 2012). It is argued that children are ‘already social actors not being in the process of becoming such’ (James & Prout, 1997: ix). Hence, children should be regarded as the gatekeepers of and experts on their own lives, who actively construct understandings through everyday interaction (Danby & Farrell, 2005; Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Greig, Taylor & Mackay, 2007; Hartas, 2010; Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). Tisdall (2012) argued that parallels were evident between the conceptualisation of children/childhood and disabled people/disability: both groups were likely to be positioned as insufficient citizens, while research showed that their capacities had been undervalued and that they were able to take part in decision-making.

It is undeniable that constructing children as ‘being’ active and competent social actors could significantly challenge oppressive and controlling child-adult power relations. Nevertheless, should the notion of ‘becoming’ be totally dismissed? I have no intention of denying children’s agency; however, ignoring the ‘becoming’ process

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<sup>23</sup> However, the treaty leaves unanswered questions about children’s competence to articulate their views and make decisions (Davis & Watson, 2000), a situation which may continue to legitimise the silencing of some children who may experience challenges in articulating their views, such as children with learning difficulties.

could also be problematic. Such a rationale denies the fact that children are constantly changing biologically, psychologically and socially, and imposes a static, passive and fixed image of who the children are at present, closing off the possibility that they might be part of an unfolding social process that shapes them through interactions. Accordingly, Uprichard (2008) emphasised that childhood was necessarily both ‘being and becoming’, thus embracing the image of their becoming future agents rather than fragmenting their agency through the arrow of time. Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) also argued that the notion of ‘becoming’ did not have to be associated with a normative path of development: ‘To conceive of *process without predetermination* is to engage children in the *present continuous* tense’ (p. 510).

Overall, the understanding of children as ‘being and becoming’ is pertinent in this research, because it foregrounds the idea that disabled children’s voices should be heard in matters of importance to them, and that through the process of inclusive education, disabled children could be enabled to achieve both learning and participation. In a school community, children and teachers all participate in and contribute to the process of ‘being and becoming’ as interdependent agents, with the possibility of transforming school life.

### 3.3.2 Concepts and troubles of pupil voice

Pupil voice is about the views and perceptions of pupils (Michael & Frederickson, 2013). The notion usually implies strategies of listening to what pupils have to say with the purpose of improving education provision. Cook-Sather (2006) noted that ‘pupil voice’ suggested the presence, active participation and empowerment of pupils in the process of making decisions on education policy and practice. Morgan (2011) construed the notion as covering formal and informal interactions between teachers and pupils through which teachers explicitly drew on pupils’ perspectives on classroom teaching and learning. Fielding (2004a) used the notion of ‘student voice’ to refer to the activities that ‘encourage reflection, discussion, dialogue and action on matters that primarily concern students, but also, by implication, school staff and the communities they serve’ (p. 199). Flutter (2007) wrote that ‘pupil voice can be seen as nested within the broader principle of pupil participation, a term which embraces

strategies that offer pupils opportunities for active involvement in decision-making within their schools' (p. 344).

As a critique of power distribution and social control in education, neither research about 'voice' nor that about 'pupil participation' is new (Gibson 2006; Rudduck & Flutter 2004). Based on years of pioneering work in the UK from the 1990s, researchers concluded that the pedagogical benefits of listening to pupils in education could include: provision by pupils of invaluable information that teachers could examine and thereby improve their practice; nurturance of reciprocal relationships between pupils and teachers through learning from each other; and a more positive experience of learning and participation for pupils when their voices are heard (Flutter, 2007; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). Also in the UK, there has been significant progress in legislation on engaging pupil voice. For example, in the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice 2014, children's participation in decision-making was explicitly stipulated as the key principle (Department for Education [DfE] & Department of Health [DoH], 2014). Noyes's (2005) thematic review of three key works in the pupil voice movement showed that the rationale of pupil voice seemed to be two-fold: on the one hand, it had a strong focus on teaching and learning, with the potential to create better outcomes, such as increased attainment, for individual children and schools; on the other hand, it stressed the need to promote democracy and active citizenship in schools as part of the learning experience. The differentiation of these two positions echoed the tensions between discourses of social justice and of performativity.

Nevertheless, given all its potential pedagogical and emancipatory benefits, listening to pupil voice is far from a straightforward and unambiguous process. Lewis and Porter (2007) summarised Fielding (2004b)'s arguments on the questions and dilemmas faced by pupil voice researchers: 'Do we recognise the plurality of voices? Do we downplay the voices that seem too strident and foreground those that most readily make sense to us? Are we genuinely attentive to criticism? How does our professional and adult status frame our perspective? How confident can we be that our research does not perpetuate the status quo? Can we be sure that our data will not



be ultimately used for the purposes of control?’ Next, I will discuss the main challenges faced in pupil voice research.

The first issue, which is also relevant to my inquiry, concerns the re-production of inequality in the initiatives of listening to children: whose voices are heard and whose are not? Fielding (2004b) pointed out that the process could be problematic when ‘pupil voice’ is homogenised to conceal issues of difference. Flutter (2007) also warned that even if all pupils were consulted, the more articulate pupils’ views were more likely to be heard over others’. Indeed, researchers tend not to reveal detailed information about pupils and offer little discussion of how to achieve a balanced representation of voices. For example, looking through research that seeks pupils’ perspectives in schools, it is often unclear whether disabled children are included or not in the sampling and whether the methods of data collection would work for a diversity of children (e.g. Tan, 2014).

Because disabled children’s views are often devalued due to the assumption that they are less competent than other children (Davis, 2009; Davis & Watson, 2000; Gibson, 2006; Tisdall, 2012), this research aims to listen to this group of children by appropriate methods. However, I am aware that focusing on one group might entail the ignorance of other children who also experience marginalisation. Also, the decision to highlight disabled children’s voices is inevitably informed by my assumptions about social relations; in fact, some disabled children might not perceive themselves as being oppressed or silenced. To respect the plurality and individuality of children’s views and experiences, I avoid prescribing negative schooling experiences to disabled children. It is equally important to recognise their positive experiences of schooling and aspects that can facilitate their inclusion.

The other main problem in the pupil voice movement is related to the ultimate purpose of listening. In the UK, where pupil consultation has become a norm in schooling – indeed, ‘over formalised’ according to Lewis (2004) – Fielding (2010) warned that pupil voice might be addressed only as a technique to polish a school’s profile or impress authorities, parents or funders by drawing on a moral discourse of ‘welcoming diversity and difference’ (p. 5). Flutter (2007) was concerned that pupil voice could end up as one of the ‘educational chart-toppers’ (p. 352). Moreover,

Fielding (2010) pointed out that, although some schools had spent time and effort to listen to and learn from pupils, their agenda was to regulate and control pupils' performance in the service of institutional needs. He warned that a genuine personal encounter with children could be missing. Noyes (2005) also noted that teachers might still interpret pupils' views within the existing curriculum and assessment regimes because of the power imbalance between teachers and pupils, which dismissed the roles of children in transforming the provision in an imaginative way. Rudduck (2007) found that even if pupils were asked to voice their views, teachers could still perform as the gatekeepers to judge whether pupils' statements were relevant or practical in terms of classroom realities. Therefore, researchers must carefully scrutinise their interpretations of pupils' views, and ask 'what's next' after hearing their voices, to avoid using children's comments only to justify existing practices or serve adults' interests in an instrumental way, such as framing children's positive experiences in special schools or negative experiences in regular schools as 'evidence' to support the existence of segregated settings (e.g. Nugent, 2008; Prunty, Dupont & Mcdaid, 2012).

Veck (2009) argued that not being listened to was fundamentally a kind of exclusion that denied a person's full humanity, and that in a place where no meaningful hearing occurred, 'the differences between us make no difference to us' (p. 146). With the changing demography in pupil population, teachers could feel uncertain about how to respond to the diversity of learners. Children arrive in schools with their varied lives, with which schools and teachers might be relatively unfamiliar. Listening to pupil voice is the way to learn about each child as a person. More responsive and inclusive provision could be devised based on the knowledge of children's beliefs, experiences and perspectives.

### **3.3.3 Cultural notes: Chinese views of childhood**

Wyness (2013) argued that there seemed to be an imposition of a western notion of childhood onto other contexts, rather than retention of space for the diversity of childhood. While recognising the importance of promoting children's wellbeing, I also agree on the need to acknowledge that, across social and cultural contexts, there

are different understandings of childhood and what counts as children's rights and participation.

To illustrate my point of view, we could take a simple example. In Chinese schools, all pupils are involved in taking care of their classrooms, for example by cleaning floors after school (*Zhiri*). Such a practice, from a western perspective, might be criticised on grounds that children were being exploited as 'free labour' or at least, that they could not exercise their right to decide whether or not they should be responsible for such work. Nevertheless, for children and teachers in China, this daily routine is seen as a necessary, valued and enjoyable practice of contributing to the community, by treating their classroom as their home. Being aware of such potential contextual differences is necessary for better understanding the circumstances in which a child might feel left out or excluded.

In China, according to Kinney (1995), it has been a long time since philosophical debates around the notion of childhood were documented during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220). These debates contain several cultural insights into the construction of Chinese childhood that should be noted here.

First, the virtue of filial piety (*Xiao*) is one of the central moral values in Chinese society and a child is socialised into regarding parents' and families' interests as duties and responsibilities (Kinney, 1995). Thus, a child's decision sometimes could be geared to his/her family interests. To respect the close relationships among family members, it is important to establish good family–school relations so that teachers and parents can work together for better educational outcomes.

Second, compared to the division between childhood and adulthood in western society, in China, the transformative process taking place in-between is given stronger emphasis. In the Chinese view of childhood and adulthood, the two seem to be bridged and connected and to overlap. On the one hand, according to Confucian ideology, a child could be seen as already an adult if s/he practises morality (Hung, 1995). The aim of education is to support the formation of a moral person (Kinney, 1995). In Chinese schooling, 'learning about how to be a person' (*Xuezuoren*) is often seen as equal in importance with academic learning. Interestingly, on the other

hand, influenced by Taoism, the means and ends of a person's lifelong self-cultivation are supposed to retain the innocence of childhood, which is closely associated with kindness, benevolence and openness. Such a cultural belief highlights what adults might learn from observing and reflecting on children.

Third, the status of children in Chinese society has experienced critical historical development along with social change. In the period of feudalism, children were seen as family property. When the civil revolution started, young people constituted the major force in the political movement. In the modern era, children are the 'future forces' of China's development and social transformation (Pease, 1995). Children are seen as deserving the best resources and supports: 'everything is for next generation'; and education is seen as the key to supporting the economic and political advancement of the country.

In China, in spite of school-based initiatives, formal pupil consultation has not acquired the status of a norm in schooling. In my view, however, this does not mean that pupil voice is not heard at all, or is not realised in other forms beyond formal surveys or interviews, which I shall pay particular attention to in this inquiry.

### **3.4 Linking pupil voice with inclusive education**

Researchers have argued that in principle, the engagement of pupil voice in the arena of inclusive education was itself a manifestation of inclusion (Messiou, 2012; Morgan, 2011). However, what is commonly seen is that a research might present children's general views on schooling without necessarily analysing issues of inclusion and exclusion, or discussing whether pupil voice matters to the development of inclusive practice in classrooms and schools. There is still limited research that links the idea of pupil voice with inclusive education, especially with a focus on disabled children as a group. In this research, to listen to disabled children's views and experiences in regular schools in Shanghai is to recognise a disabled child as a full person. Through the inquiry, I intend to explore whether and how children's comments and ideas could inform the development of inclusive education, specifically inclusive practice, so as to transform their everyday school encounters. Next, I will turn to the existing literature to illustrate several propositions on the

potential implications of pupil voice for inclusive practice. Then I will review research that promotes children's perspectives on inclusive education, and justify the assertion that teachers' voices should not be completely left out.

### 3.4.1 Potential implications for inclusive practice

At this stage, I attempt to note the following insights, gained from the relevant literature, on the potential implications of listening to children's voices for the development of inclusive practice. These five propositions will be discussed in the following sections. They are revisited in light of the research findings in section 7.3.2.

- Making visible the facilitators of and barriers to learning and participation
- Facilitating reflective practice
- Challenging deterministic beliefs
- Fostering an inclusive culture
- Recognising existing and sustainable resources embedded in local contexts

#### *Making visible the facilitators of and barriers to learning and participation*

Pupils and teachers may have very different views of schooling (McCluskey, Brown, Munn, Lloyd, Hamilton, Sharp & Macleod, 2013), which means that what is experienced by children as facilitators of and barriers to their learning and participation could escape teachers' speculation. For example, introducing teaching assistants into classrooms is often promoted as an effective approach within inclusive practice. However, by consulting children, Rutherford (2012) found that instead of being helpful for children's learning, some of the participants felt stigmatised by the presence of teaching assistants who often accompanied them, which hindered their willingness to take part in learning. Messiou's (2012) research also showed that collaborating with children could bring to the surface issues surrounding inclusive or exclusionary practice. By drawing on such information, teachers and schools might identify gaps in the conditions for pupils' learning (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007).

### *Facilitating reflective practice*

Taking children's experiences of learning into consideration could be understood as an important step in teachers' reflective practice for professional development (Ainscow, 2015; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Ghaye & Ghaye, 1998; Griffiths & Davies, 1995; Hart, 2000; Herd, 2010). For instance, Hart (2000) underlined that teachers needed to understand children's meanings, because in classroom interactions, children were just as important as teachers. She noted that through dialogues with pupils, teachers could examine the way their practices were perceived, received and understood, the knowledge of which was fundamental to reflecting on what could be done differently, or 'new possibilities for enhancing children's participation and learning in practice' (p. 9). Flutter (2007) asserted that pupil voice could be used as a powerful tool with which teachers could improve their own practice. Pupils' perspectives could also be integrated into school assessments, and through an iterative process between action and evaluation, the improvement of practice could be sustained. Thus Miles and Ainscow (2010) argued that listening to children was a critical step in creating conversations about practice so as to move forward towards inclusive schools.

### *Challenging deterministic beliefs*

Teachers' practice is usually underpinned by an understanding of children's learning capacity and the reasons for educational difficulties. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) argued that such deterministic beliefs were likely to make some children vulnerable to restricted participation, especially those who were labelled as having special or additional needs. Indeed, the exclusion of disabled children from the decision-making process is often justified by professionals with reference to children's impairments (Davis & Watson, 2000). However, research evidence showed that teachers' beliefs about children's capacities could change after participating in pupil voice projects (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). Paying close attention to children could open up opportunities for teachers to challenge their existing assumptions about who children are, what they are capable of, what difficulties they are facing, what supports should be given, and who they could

become in the future. Overall, pupil voice could be an effective approach to disrupting teachers' beliefs about children's abilities.

### *Fostering an inclusive culture*

Another important insight from pupil voice research is that engaging pupils' views in schools might help transform the student-teacher relationship to a more active and collaborative one (Flutter, 2007; Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007). If positive relationships among school members are facilitated, an inclusive culture could also be fostered in a form which addresses community values in relation to rights, responsibilities and collaborations (Ainscow, 2007; Black-Hawkins et al., 2007; Corbett, 1999). Within an inclusive school culture, pupils are respected as equal persons with teachers, which represents the means and ends of human aims for education, concerning how we live with each other (Booth, 2002; Corbett, 1999; Fielding, 2010).

### *Recognising existing and sustainable resources embedded in local contexts*

Nowadays, schools have not been short of guidance and advice from external experts, organisations and LEAs, but teachers might find such suggestions irrelevant or impossible to put into practice. For example, regular schools might be advised to rely on specialists as the most essential resources for educating SEN children, while the continuing marginalisation and exclusion remain hidden (Ainscow & Miles, 2011). When schools are spending more and more funding and effort in seeking help, it is often ignored that pupils are among the existing and sustainable resources within school communities. SooHoo warned that 'we listen to outside experts to inform us, and, consequently, we overlook the treasure in our very own backyards: our students' (1993, as cited in Flutter, 2007: 352). Pupils should be seen as insiders because they have direct daily experiences of schooling processes. It is they who know in their hearts what could be done to support their learning and participation. Rudduck (2007) emphasised that pupils' suggestions were insightful and practical enough to be implemented by schools.

### 3.4.2 Pupils' perspectives in inclusive education research

In recent years, we have seen a growing body of inclusive education research that seeks children's perspectives and experiences. Apart from researchers' specific research focuses and purposes, there are great variations in research design (e.g. consultative or collaborative approach; quantitative or qualitative methods), participants (e.g. representing 'all' pupils or focusing on 'some' groups), means of eliciting children's views (e.g. verbal or visual methods) and research contexts (e.g. developed or developing countries). Below is a review of some of the research that is most relevant to my inquiry.

To ensure that the heard pupil voice does entail actions from teachers and schools so as to make a real difference in children's lives, many researchers promote collaborative action research in which researchers work with pupils and teachers to use children's comments as guidance for improving practices in classrooms and schools. Ainscow (2015) wrote about a three-year project 'Responding to diversity by engaging with students' voices', which involved 8 secondary schools from England, Portugal and Spain, and aimed to develop teachers' inclusive classroom practices by engaging with children's views. The technique of 'lesson study' was used in which teachers observed and commented on each other's teaching, which is a normative practice in schools in China. The pupils identified as vulnerable to marginalisation were mostly children with immigrant backgrounds. Teachers consulted children about their preferred ways of learning, then integrated children's ideas into lesson planning. Ainscow asserted that listening to children was the most influential factor in responding to learning diversity: it not only improved the practice, but also shifted the assumptions that endorsed the practice. Taking a firm stance that learners' voices should be placed at the centre of inclusive education, Messiou (2012) conducted research with a primary class in England. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with each child in the class, facilitated by techniques such as 'message in a bottle'. Children were also given flip cameras to capture what was helpful and what was not helpful to their learning. Then adults and children from the class discussed the information gathered. She concluded that children's alternative perspectives could effectively challenge existing practices, and



formulated a cyclical 4-step framework with which to reflect and act upon children's voices. Nutbrown and Clough (2009) reported findings from practitioner-research projects on developing inclusive culture through listening to young children's views, which generated actions to create a more inclusive and enabling environment for all pupils. The collection of empirical research in the book 'Responding to diversity in schools: an inquiry-based approach' edited by Miles and Ainscow (2010) also offered substantial evidence for the relevance of pupil voice in understanding and improving schools' practices in international contexts through an innovative and collaborative approach.

I also recognise and value the significance of such a research approach. Nevertheless, I need to note that clearly not every researcher is in a position to conduct collaborative action research, which inevitably requires tremendous commitment from practitioners. For example, as a research student and an outsider to schools, the extent of cooperation from schools that I could negotiate is very limited compared to that of a researcher who is better established in an academic career or who is working as a teacher. In addition, there could be sensitive ethical issues involved in such a research approach. For the research commented on by Ainscow (2015), was it ethical for teachers to nominate children who were 'vulnerable' in their eyes and only engage with their views, which might result in neglecting other children's experiences? In Messiou's (2012) research, was it ethical to reveal to the whole class what was shared by individual children, even if negative experiences of marginalisation might be mentioned? Was it enough to only tell children and teachers to avoid speculating on who said what? Could such practice also act as a barrier against children voicing their needs because of anxiety about possible unwanted consequences? I consider that these ethical issues might only be absent if there is already a shared inclusive culture, which does not apply to all schools and classes. Otherwise, how can the researcher ensure that some children are not exploited or further stigmatised?

In other research, the investigations are primarily conducted to explore the status of pupils' views and experiences, which I argue could constitute necessary preparation for possible follow-up reflections and actions.

Some research sets out to listen to ‘all’ children’s voices. This does not mean that all available children are included in the research, but that children’s views are not differentiated by which group a child belongs to or the label attached to him or her. Mahbub (2008) adapted key aspects of ‘culture, policy and practice’ from the *Index for Inclusion* (Booth et al., 2000) in her research on pupils’ views in a non-formal primary school in Bangladesh. She used multiple methods including observation, ‘message in a bottle’ (Messiou, 2002), drawing, questionnaire and focus group. Positive and negative experiences were identified on issues such as belongingness, aspirations for learning, and teasing among peers. She concluded that inclusive education had not yet been realised in Bangladesh, and that children should be involved in the policy-making process. In England, Adderley, Hope, Hughes, Jones, Messiou and Shaw (2015) sought children’s views of teachers’ practices in regard to helping or hindering a sense of inclusion in classrooms, by adopting a wide range of tools for working with children in groups. Four themes emerged – unfairness, shouting, loneliness and seating plans – which indicated the importance of interpersonal relationships in fostering inclusion.

Disabled/SEN children’s voices tend to be marginalised; however, as I have noted before, when ‘all’ children’s views were collected, it often remained unclear whether the disabled/SEN pupils were involved or to what extent their voices had been equally represented among all the other children’s. Schneider (2009) argued that because SEN children tended to be seen as unlikely to achieve ‘normal adulthood’, the silence of their voices was even ‘louder’ than that of other children (p. 2). Her research focused on SEN children’s peer relationships in integrated classrooms. Two cases of individual children were analysed, which revealed issues such as the way special supports might add to stigma, and the importance to a child of feeling recognised and accepted by the community. Rose and Shevlin (2004) engaged young people from marginalised groups such as SEN children, disabled children and traveller children. They found that many participants were excluded because of the negative impacts of the labels. The specific experiences of children that this research revealed reminded us that in schools, it is often the case that some children are more likely to be subject to labelling and special provision. If pupil voice researchers do

not specifically examine relevant issues for these children, their voices will still risk being marginalised and even silenced.

The exclusion of disabled children from pupil voice research might also be ascribed to children's impairments, used to assert children's incompetence to participate in a project. Nonetheless, qualitative and ethnographic research into disabled children's everyday experiences in educational settings has offered much evidence affirming these children's agency and competency to take part in decision-making. For example, Davis and Watson's (2000, 2001) analysis showed that, just like other children, disabled children also kept negotiating their identities and competency on a daily basis. The researchers argued: '...it should not be assumed that disabled children's non-compliance, silence, or resistance is a sign of incompetence' (2000: 219). They suggested a multi-level approach with which to challenge the institutional, cultural and personal barriers to disabled children's inclusion. Schauwer, Hove, Mortier and Loots (2009) conducted a qualitative inquiry into the everyday experiences of various stakeholders, including disabled children, of inclusive education in Belgium. It was found that disabled children could offer very different perspectives from those of adults, and that the children were 'in a constant stream of playing with certain social expectations and they live in between the "regular-school-world" and the "world as made for them with their label"' (p. 109). Joshi's (2006) research, which included 50 disabled children in India's regular schools, explored children's awareness of the self, their relationships with other children, and experiences of prejudice and stigma, by making sense of their similarities to and differences from others.

Some researchers consulted disabled/SEN children about their views of schooling, which involved encouraging children to directly comment on educational provision. Lewis, Robertson and Parsons (2005) mapped disabled children's and their families' experiences of education in the UK in relation to five main themes: independence and autonomy, ambition and aspirations, knowledge and assertion of rights, experience of accessible/inaccessible educational services and environments, and attitudes and behaviours.

In Scotland, Woolfson, Harker, Lowe, Sheilds and Mackintosh (2007) carried out a research that combined postal questionnaires and focus group interviews to investigate the views of disabled children and young people on accessibility to education in regard to the curriculum, physical environment and information. The findings brought valuable insights into ways of improving the current provision. For example, pupils mentioned the confusion caused by having too many different specialists working around them, the struggle to do their schoolwork independently, and the experience of positive discrimination involving their school council memberships. However, researchers were concerned that some views were actually those of parents, who were allowed to complete some of the questionnaires for the children. The methods used in this research were thus seen to be problematic in terms of enabling children to voice their views without being 'represented' by the adults in their lives. Also in Scotland, Herd (2010) used semi-structured interviews to explore the views of 17 Additional Support Needs pupils and 8 teachers from 2 comprehensive Scottish schools. Pupils identified helpful strategies and practices, and also difficulties in accessing the curriculum. She concluded that pupils needed to be given more opportunities, and that if positive changes to practice were to be made through listening to pupils' views, alteration of the existing power relations, working arrangements and conceptualisations and measurement of educational success was required.

In Mortier, Desimpel, Schauwer and Hove's (2011) research, researchers presented photos of the supports provided for disabled children during interviews and focus group discussions. Besides recognising the positive effects of supports in removing the restrictions their impairments placed on participation in activities, tensions were identified in areas such as 'dependence-independence' or 'same-different'. The findings showed that disabled children were quite clear and precise about what supports they needed and what practices were not beneficial. Ryan (2009) asked pupils including SEN children to use cameras to generate 'visual narratives' of their views on inclusion. The researcher concluded that personalised adjustments were needed to make schools truly inclusive.

Researchers have also examined the views of specific groups within the broader category of disabled children, usually based on the types of impairments. Michael and Frederickson (2013) interviewed pupils from pupil referral units about the enablers of and barriers to achievement of positive outcomes. They found that positive relationships between pupils and teachers seemed to be the most important enabler for both academic and social-emotional outcomes. Cefai and Cooper (2010) reviewed 8 studies focused on the experiences of secondary pupils in Malta who were labelled as having Social, Emotional and Behaviour Difficulties. They found that these pupils shared common needs with others, and the pupil-teacher relationship mattered much, as what Michael and Frederickson's (2013) also found. Meanwhile, children in their research were quite clear about what supports they needed for a better schooling experience, a finding which resonated with those of Mortier et al. (2011).

Blackman (2011) explored the views of dyslexic pupils on teachers' strategies for supporting their learning in Barbados's secondary schools. Four themes were identified: learner autonomy, engagement and understanding, model of presentation or communication, and likeable personality characteristics. The research suggested that regular teaching strategies could indeed be helpful, which confirmed other researchers' questioning of 'different' provision for SEN/disabled children.

Asbjørnslett, Engelsrud and Helseth (2014) interviewed children with 'physical (dis)abilities' about their participation in everyday school life. They found that for these children, social togetherness was significant for their participation. Children did not welcome different treatment: they wanted to take part in 'regular ways', but reserving a sense of independence – that is, acting in their 'own way' (p. 11). The research argued for the need to include disabled children in educational activities along with peers. Humphrey and Lewis's (2008) research on the views of autistic pupils found that there was still a gap between the rhetoric of inclusion and the school reality in England. They highlighted the role of class teachers, communication among staff, headteachers' commitment, and the sharing of specialist knowledge, as the keys to successful inclusion.

To engage children who are more likely to encounter challenges in verbal communication, and support them in expressing their views, it is often necessary to use innovative methods rather than relying on traditional interviews. Researchers thus adopt specific methods to reach out to these children who are even more ‘silent’ than others. For example, Whitehurst (2007) elicited six children’s views, including those with no or very limited verbal skills. Photos and ‘Talking mats’ were used to facilitate interviews. It was concluded that children with profound learning disabilities were able to demonstrate the same range of preferences and fears as other children. The researcher reflected that the precondition of inclusive education was to ensure that everyone’s view was taken into account to inform practice.

Above all, the research evidence so far confirms the capabilities of children, including disabled/SEN children, to voice their opinions and experiences of schooling provision. Children’s perspectives and aspirations are seen to be relevant, insightful and practical, and should be studied to inform the development of inclusive practice in classrooms and schools. To enable and facilitate such a process, careful methodological considerations should be given to issues such as research relations with children, methods and ethics. In section 4.2.2, I will further discuss the methodological issues involved in researching with children.

### **3.4.3 Recognising teachers’ roles**

In most pupil voice research that adopts a consultative approach, teachers tend to be marginalised or excluded. Indeed, due to the existing power relations, teachers could be readily positioned as ‘opponents’ of pupils. Nevertheless, I argue that teachers’ voices need to be heard as well in a pupil voice research project.

First, teachers’ roles in children’s school lives need to be acknowledged. Mannion (2007) argued that children’s participation could only be fully understood in relation to adults’ roles in supporting or hindering its process. Lawson (2010) noted that it was teachers who could support pupils in making informed decisions. Wyness (2009) claimed that teachers could be conduits and mediators helping to make children’s participation and voices matter. As Fielding (2004b) pointed out, the potential implications of pupil voice could not be realised by simply documenting children’s

perspectives. If teachers do not act on the children's views, children might become sceptical as to why they were questioned in the first place (Rudduck, 2007), a development which would not be helpful in enabling voices to be raised. Because teachers' decisions significantly shape what children encounter (Ainscow, 1991), it is important to know what beliefs and assumptions inform their practices. Flutter (2007) cited Lincoln's (1995) words to describe the interdependency of the voices on both sides: 'Teachers can elicit student voices. And teachers can, in the process, be led to discover their own voices. One cannot happen without the other, but happily the achievement of voice is mutual, and teachers who help students to find student voices will discover that their own voices are clearer and stronger in the process' (p. 353). Thus, in the never-ending process of moving from 'no voice' towards 'dialogue' (Fielding, 2004b), teachers need to be actively involved as the significant others in pupils' lives.

Second, pupil voice research should not feed into the 'blame culture' affecting teachers (Ravet, 2007). Flutter (2007) noted prevailing concerns about the risk of silencing teacher voice. Bragg (2007) found that an initiative in a primary school which promoted pupils' participation turned out to place tremendous demands on teachers, involving changes of professional identities and relationships with others. Such consequences might be unwanted; however, they led to the argument that teacher voice should also be developed rather than undermined by the enhancement of pupil voice. In fact, when teachers and pupils all face the process of being depersonalised in a culture of performativity (Murray, 2012), it is unjust to attribute what is going wrong with regular education solely to individual teachers' problems. Characterising teachers as 'instruments' to deliver ideal practices is itself a dehumanising attitude, which fails to recognise inclusive education as a process co-constructed and negotiated by school members. Both sides need to be heard and empowered.

Furthermore, researchers have also highlighted the implications of pupil voice for teacher education. As stated by Greenstein (2016), 'the knowledge of students is just as legitimate as the knowledge of teachers, and the process of learning changes both and creates new knowledge' (p. 95). This involves a willingness of teachers as

authorities in pupil-teacher relationships to recognise their own identities as learners, which is critical to their continuous development. Cook-Sather (2009) described a project that positioned pupils as teacher educators for student teachers. She noted that it was rare to see the involvement of pupil voice in teacher education; however, participants in this project reflected that they had learned a lot from listening to pupils, such as how children could become more engaged and proactive in their learning when teachers listened to and acted upon their views. Drawing on two school examples in the 'Consulting Pupils about Teaching and Learning' project, Flutter (2007) asserted that not only was pupil voice beneficial for improving schools' practice but that its impact could also be extended beyond school units through networks across schools and regions. She thus suggested that to facilitate pupil voice in schools, the concept should be introduced into initial teacher training programmes.

In this research, I involved teachers because I recognised their essential role in transforming school lives. I see both pupils and teachers as part of the process of 'becoming': through the nurturing of collaborative and mutually respectful relationships, teachers and pupils together could gain insights into how inclusion could be approached in classrooms and schools. Although this research is not a practitioner-based study, which means that I only seek teachers' views rather than requesting them to consult children or take actions based on children's comments, the inclusion of voices from both parties should result in a more enriched and complex representation of schooling. While teachers and pupils might be expected to show different understandings of the schooling process, I argue that it is exactly through such differences that the ways to bridge teachers' and pupils' worlds might be identified.

### 3.5 Research questions

In Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, I reviewed theoretical issues and empirical research relevant to my inquiry, which is intended to explore the current status of disabled children's learning and participation in Shanghai's regular schools with the implementation of LRC. My interest in this topic was mainly derived from my personal experience of volunteering in segregated settings for disabled children and adults. Through examination of the literature, the dearth of disabled children's voices



is found to be significant – how they view and experience the schooling provision in regular schools remains unknown, which makes it hard to inspect the extent to which disabled children are included. Informed by the literature, I consider inclusive education to be fundamentally concerned with children's opportunities to learn and participate alongside peers. Disabled children should be seen as competent social actors, who can actively construct and negotiate their daily circumstances. Their voices need to be heard and acted upon, and their views may have valuable implications for the development of inclusive practice in classrooms and schools. Meanwhile, I argue that teachers' voices should not be marginalised when listening to children.

Due to the lack of first-hand accounts of the everyday school lives of disabled children in regular schools in Shanghai, I am particularly keen not only to hear what children and teachers say about their views and experiences, but also to see how they negotiate meanings through daily interactions. To gain insights into how to move forward towards inclusive education, I need to examine the facilitators of and barriers to these children's learning and participation. This research should firstly contribute significantly to the knowledge of disabled children's learning and participation in regular schools in China. Insights into schooling practice for disabled children's inclusion and the impacts of LRC policy will be gained, which could bring about practical implications for policy and practice of inclusive education in the Chinese context. In addition, I intend to explore how children's voices could be used to inform the development of inclusive practice. Moreover, this research should be able to contribute to methodological knowledge about researching inclusive education in Chinese schools, and eliciting disabled children's voices through a participatory approach. The research questions are formulated as stated below. Given the exploratory nature of this research, they are deliberately written at a comparatively broad level, to serve mainly as guidance for the inquiry process (Agee, 2009):

- *How do disabled children (designated as LRC pupils) understand, experience and negotiate their learning and participation in regular schools in Shanghai?*
- *How do teachers, being significant adults for children, perceive and negotiate the learning and participation of disabled children (designated as LRC pupils)?*
- *What are the facilitators of and barriers to their learning and participation?*

### 3.6 Summary

This chapter presents a discussion of relevant literature to inform the theoretical stance of this inquiry. The notion of inclusive education was seen to be contested and the process of inclusion could involve complex negotiations through barriers, dilemmas and tensions. I underlined the importance of examining the schooling process in relation to inclusion and exclusion, especially the relevance of developing inclusive practice. I justified my decision to focus on the group of disabled children in order to raise their voices out of silence, rather than risking marginalising their views in an inquiry about ‘all’ children. Being aware of the issues surrounding the implementation of inclusive education in international contexts, I noted the need to avoid any ‘quick judgement’ from a dominant northern/western perspective, but rather to examine the local processes closely to identify appropriate approaches to inclusion. Perspectives from pupil voice research and childhood studies have much to offer in enabling disabled children’s voices to be heard. I stressed that listening to pupil voice was a practice reflecting inclusive values, and that, as suggested by empirical research, children’s views could make invaluable contributions to the knowledge construction of inclusive education. Informed by the literature, I formulated the main research questions.



## **Section two: Methodology and methods**

### **Chapter 4 Methodology and research design**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

Although, in China, the LRC policy which supports disabled children's access to regular schools has been gradually framed into a national inclusive education policy, little is known about the current status of disabled children's inclusion in regular schools. In particular, disabled children's voices are significantly missing in spite of a large body of survey research on teachers' attitudes towards the implementation of LRC policy. Informed by theoretical perspectives from pupil voice research and childhood studies, I argue that disabled children should be recognised as competent social actors whose voices need to be heard, and that listening to what they have to say about inclusion and exclusion in the schooling process could inform the development of inclusive practice in classrooms and schools. Meanwhile, teachers, as the significant adults in children's school lives, must be heard as well. Thus, this research focuses on how disabled children and their teachers understand and negotiate learning and participation in regular schools in Shanghai, and the facilitators of and barriers to inclusive education.

As discussed in Chapter 2, there has been no research that offered a satisfactory analysis of how the inclusion of disabled children was constructed and negotiated in regular schools in China (and Shanghai). Also, the knowledge of inclusive education for disabled children in China cannot move forward when too much research leads to the same conclusion – reiterating broader structural obstacles. Besides the narrowed research focus, in the existing research on the implementation of LRC, issues related to methodology are prominent, such as the limitations of questionnaires, and the failure to acknowledge the researchers' paradigm of positivism, which is dominant in Chinese education research.

Thus, in order to gain further insights into disabled children's inclusion in Shanghai's regular schools, I consider it essential to also seek alternative choices as to how we design and conduct a research. As suggested by Hammersley (2002) and

Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014), I should reflect on the following questions: What methodological framework would best suit my inquiry in terms of enabling me to collect enough of the information I want and facilitating a trustworthy interpretation and analysis? What research methods could maximise my opportunities to gain high-quality and relevant data? Including disabled children as participants immediately poses more challenges, such as: How can I effectively support children's participation in research and hear their authentic voices? How can I manage complex ethical issues throughout the research process?

This chapter focuses on methodological considerations and research design. I will first discuss my epistemological stance as social and transformative constructivism. Then in section 4.2.2, I review the methodological issues in researching with children, which are informed by theoretical debates and researchers' experiences of conducting empirical research. The section covers four themes, including how to manage research relations, how to effectively communicate with children, what research methods are perceived as suitable for engaging children, and how to support disabled children's participation in research, especially those with intellectual challenges. At the beginning of section 4.3, I illustrate the research design as qualitative and exploratory. I discuss how both inductive and deductive processes were involved, and introduce the overall research procedure. I introduce my choice of the *Framework for Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) as a research tool, and explain how it was adapted to suit the research focus and review its effectiveness. Then I explain and justify the adoption of the ethnographic approach, and discuss how reflexivity was exercised through an examination of my researcher identity. Section 4.3.4 offers a detailed discussion of research ethics. Besides describing issues of procedural ethics, such as gaining informed consent and maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, I also discuss the ethical dilemmas that I encountered during the fieldwork. Before ending the chapter, I illustrate how trustworthiness could be ascribed to this inquiry. Further description and discussion of research methods for collecting and analysing data are presented in Chapter 5.

## 4.2 Methodological considerations

There have been different views on the extent to which a research's methodology should be guided by its theoretical framework. Silverman (2004, 2011) argued that a research should retain its theoretical and methodological coherence; nevertheless, Creswell (2013) pointed out that research paradigms shared complex overlaps and the boundaries in-between were never clear-cut. With experiences of different types of research (e.g. quantitative/qualitative and experimental/naturalistic etc.), I am inclined to be pluralistic in methodology (Pathirage, Amaratunga & Haigh, 2008), refraining from claiming that any particular paradigm is inherently 'superior' to others by its nature. However, this does not mean that researchers need not to be reflective, critical and transparent in regard to how knowledge is understood and produced in research, and to the basic assumptions behind research design and methods. For the current inquiry, it is necessary to articulate my epistemological stance and the methodological implications of 'researching *with* children'.

### 4.2.1 Social and transformative constructivism

First of all, I identify this research as located in the research paradigm of social constructivism. According to Burr (2015), it might be unhelpful to attempt to define social constructivism in any precise way because it represents more of a 'family resemblance' (p. 2) among the key assumptions on how we perceive knowledge and how we come to our understandings. Social constructivism challenges the belief that there exist, solely within individuals or societies, entities which could causally determine human behaviours and social phenomena. Instead, our knowledge, such as the concepts or categories that we use to describe and make sense of the world, is historically, culturally and socially constructed through interactions – a product of social processes rather than objective observations (Burr, 2015). The discussions in previous chapters around notions such as disability, SEN, children or inclusive education have reflected such a stance, which views our understandings as socially constructed.

Meanwhile, recognising personal agency means that individuals have the capacities to bring about change (Burr, 2015). Such a proposition is an important premise for

the realisation of inclusion in practice. In this research, I saw children and teachers as agents who could 'engage in the process of construction of meaning or identity in such a way as to influence the form that that meaning or identity takes' (Fraser & Robinson, 2004: 76). They could negotiate learning and participation in their daily school lives. Disabled children were not seen as the receiving ends of social structures (Oliver, 1992; James & Prout, 1990). Their agency to act upon structure and negotiate their circumstances was also affirmed (Cameron, 2007; Fraser & Robinson, 2004; Swain & French, 2000). In other words, their active participation in the schooling process was recognised and highlighted (Black-Hawkins, 2010).

Based on social constructivism, the way to research human experiences and social phenomena is to examine interactions, processes and practices, in which knowledge is co-constructed through language and actions. In the context of schooling, meanings are shaped, shared and negotiated among the schools' members (Hammersley, 2014). Since meaning is given through interactions, depending on who participates and with what aims, the influence of power relations on which views are counted as the 'truth' is underlined. The marginalisation of children's voices is a perfect example of power imbalance in knowledge construction, when what children say tends to be treated as less valuable and reliable (Robinson & Kellett, 2004). Thus, promoting children's voices in research has the aim of 'greater participation, empowerment, ethicality or claims to truth' (Nind, 2014: 527).

Furthermore, I attempt to align this research with a transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2010), to make more explicit my stance that rejects the pathologising of disabled children, values their marginalised voices and explores possibilities for improving education provision: thus approaching new understandings and practices.

Overall, I immersed myself in disabled children's school lives to examine the processes, dynamics and interactions that contributed to or hindered their learning and participation. My aim was not to discover the objective 'truth' but to interpret and represent a group of disabled children and their teacher's views and experiences in regular schools. In spite of employing a research tool (see section 4.3.1), I acknowledged my role in the co-construction of research findings and interpretations, which thus required me to retain reflexivity in the research process.

## 4.2.2 Researching with children

In Chapter 3, I discussed the rationale of promoting disabled children's voices in this research not only for its potential pedagogical benefits, but also recognising such practice as what inclusive education should involve. Nonetheless, the decision to involve disabled children as participants inevitably entails methodological challenges, either theoretical or practical. Regarding the question of how we should research children, different disciplines show different sets of norm practice, since, as noted by Darbyshire et al. (2005), researchers 'immediately confront cultural, social, psychological and political perspectives' (p. 419) when children become participants. Davis, Watson and Cunningham-Burley (2008) also stressed the challenge presented by the clash between psychological and social perspectives. In this section, I am going to discuss several key methodological issues that are important to this inquiry.

### 4.2.2.1 Research relations

One of the major challenges in researching children concerns how to balance and negotiate adult-child power relations (Robinson & Kellett, 2004). In my previous training in psychology and special education, the dominant paradigm was conducting research *about* or *on* children (Fraser, 2004): children were seen as research objects containing the 'facts' that waited to be discovered by researchers. With the re-construction of children as 'being' social actors, it is necessary to shift the methodological approach towards researching *with* children. Fraser (2004) noted that researching *with* children specifically stressed the importance of making sense of the research to children, and securing the space to negotiate with them throughout the research process. Rapport with children can be more readily established when they are positioned as the experts on their lives (Knox, Mok & Parmenter, 2000). When power relations with children are transformed, pupil voice research is not about researchers 'speaking for' children but 'speaking with' them (Fielding, 2004).

Informed by such a stance, a researcher should avoid imposing what is considered to be 'right' for children by controlling all aspects of the study, but should rather provide opportunities for children's better participation in making decisions on matters that are about them, because research knowledge of this kind might result in



real impacts on education policy and practice. In a research project, these ‘decisions’ could be as minor as where, when and to what extent that children should engage with research activities, or as significant as formulating research questions, devising research methods and asking whether they would like to take part in the research.

The frequently cited ‘ladder of participation’ (Hart, 1992) aims to evaluate the degrees of children’s participation in a research study, from no participation (manipulation, decoration and tokenism) to informed, consultative and child-initiated participation. Although the ‘ladder’ underlines the distinctive difference between treating children as ‘objects’ to serve researchers’ interests and ‘participants’ who can have impacts on how research about them is conducted, I argue that hierarchical thinking about children’s participation could be problematic by leading to judgements based on the form of the research; that is, to assuming that a study led by children must be more participatory than a consultative study. This is not to dispute the relevance of a participatory approach to researching with children; however, the issue is more complicated. For instance, children might still agree to be co-researchers due to pressure to comply with adults’ wishes. Similarly, asking children to interview one another cannot guarantee access to authentic voices, because power relations could exist among children too. There could also be a dispute over the issue of payment for children who perform as researchers or investigators in a research project. Moreover, if research is conducted instrumentally for the ultimate purpose of regulating children (Fielding, 2004a; Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008), then it is still tokenism in spite of how ‘participatory’ it looks. Therefore, since every research is located in its particular context, which has crucial influence on the kind of research plan that is possible and feasible, it is more important, rather than uncritically employing what is considered a ‘participatory’ research design, to embed the balancing of relations in a researcher’s daily interactions with child participants.

This research was led by me in terms of setting research questions, choosing research methods, collecting and analysing data and presenting findings. It was mainly a consultative inquiry about pupil voice. Although I considered the ‘child-researcher’ approach, due to the sensitivity of the disability stigma in Chinese society and

schools<sup>24</sup> it would not have been ethical to risk exploitation by asking disabled children to form a research group and conduct inquiries in regular schools.

However, I endeavoured to promote children's participation in every possible way. In the context of Chinese schooling, where children are expected to respect and obey elders (Kinney, 1995), it was particularly important for me to balance the power relations, so that children would not just tell me what they guessed I wanted to hear (Siegal, 1997) or conform to teachers' preferences, rather than sharing their own ideas. I adopted several strategies. Children were informed about the research and I gained direct consent from them, so that they could decide whether or not they would like to participate; they had the right to opt out at any time they liked (see section 4.3.4.1 for gaining informed consent). Children were consulted about the time and place that they were comfortable with for conducting research activities. Children were respected as gatekeepers who could decide what they would like to share with me. They should be relaxed about continuing their participation in the research or exercising 'informed dissent' (Clark, 2014: 206). They should be free to say 'no' to me, and express their resistances or dislikes without worrying about my personal judgement or the issue of confidentiality. I reassured children that they did not have to feel obliged to answer my questions. They could say 'I don't know' or tell me when they did not understand what my question was about (Lewis, 2004). For any question that I asked them, I avoided giving an impression that there existed only one 'correct' answer, so that they did not have to treat our conversations like schoolwork to complete or teachers' classroom questions to answer. Participatory activities were chosen which were suitable for researching with children (see section 5.3.2 for detailed introduction). With all these strategies, the power relations with children were balanced, which was the key to producing informative data. Children were quite willing to reveal their thoughts to me, and sometimes they disagreed with, challenged or laughed at what I was saying.

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<sup>24</sup> In China, most abandoned children are found to be disabled, and disabled children and their families could experience discrimination from other people (Shang et al., 2011). A recent report by Human Rights Watch also showed that Chinese disabled children and young people faced daily discrimination at all levels of mainstream education (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

#### 4.2.2.2 Effective communication

Since it is through my interactions with children that they come to a better understanding of the research and of who I am as a researcher, I need to be conscious, mindful and reflective regarding how to communicate effectively with children. This does not mean that I have to talk or behave exactly like a child, but simply that children's preferences should be taken into consideration.

I followed several widely recognised principles of communicating with children in research, such as using simple and direct language when talking with them to avoid confusing them with abstract concepts or ideas (Porter, 2014; Punch, 2002), and keeping topics closely related and relevant to children's daily school lives, which centre on lessons, places and people (Dockrell, Lewis & Lindsay, 2000; Georgeson, 2012; Porter, Daniels, Georgeson, Hacker, Gallop, Feiler, Tarleton & Watson, 2008). In terms of how to ask children questions, researchers usually favour open-ended questions which cannot be answered simply by 'yes' or 'no' (Nesbitt, 2000), while Connors and Stalker's (2007) research with children with learning disabilities suggested that it might work better to break up general questions into more specific ones. However, Nind (2008) argued that there was no single approach that could guarantee the quality of the data. I agree with her stance that, beyond abstract 'principles', a researcher should stay responsive to children's individualities. I used both open and closed questions depending on the immediate situation. For example, after first asking open questions, it could be helpful to propose closed ones for clarification or confirmation from children.

#### 4.2.2.3 Suitable methods for children

How can I access children's views through appropriate methods? Should I use different methods from those that are commonly used with adults? Lewis and Porter (2007) pointed out that researchers from various epistemological stances would have differing opinions on what methods were appropriate. Barker and Weller (2003) argued that using child-friendly methods could help move the research away from being adult-centred. However, Punch (2002) noticed that there seemed to be an impulse, when it came to children, to make the methods look fun and 'child-friendly'.

She stressed that the ways of doing research with children were underpinned by the way children were perceived, and that such an impulse could be derived from adults' perceptions of children as completely 'different'.

Indeed, many methods that researchers have used in child research, such as photography or drawings, could also be used with adults. I consider that on the one hand, compared to adults, children may access quite different resources and information in their lives, and have particular interests, skills and familiar ways of communicating and expressing their feelings and thoughts. On the other hand, the concepts of children and adults artificially divide them; thus researchers should not overlook the connections and commonalities of researching with 'persons'. As Fraser (2004) argued, 'there is nothing inherently or essentially "child-friendly" about such techniques; they are all contingent to the frames of cultural reference of researchers and participants' (p. 25). Thus, I agree with Fraser (2004) that the principle underlying suitable research methods could more accurately be called 'participant-friendly', and should not be constrained by unnecessary stereotypes based on normative perceptions. Flexibility and innovation should be embraced in expanding the methodological knowledge of researching children's perspectives. I need to engage with the methodological uncertainties surrounding research with children through an open and experimental approach (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008).

The Mosaic approach developed by Clark and Moss (2001), which draws on the new sociology of childhood and Participatory Action Research, could offer an essential starting point for researching with children. Within its framework, children should be treated as experts and agents of their own lives. Multiple methods are recommended to embrace children's individuality, which could enable even very young children to participate and contribute to data collection and to analysis and representation of their ideas and experiences (Clark, 2014). Multiple methods are also seen as helping to reduce adults' control over how children might contribute and what they should say, thus demonstrating recognition of children as active agents (Darbyshire et al., 2005). Nevertheless, as Lewis and Porter (2007) warned, participatory or child-centred methods should not be taken for granted: how the methods facilitate or constrain children's responses needs to be examined. In this research, I also consider

it necessary to use multiple methods to expand the possibilities for children to encounter the method that works better for them. By this means the research could become more inclusive of all child participants. The information gained through different methods could complement each other, adding increased breadth and depth. I need to be clear about each method's advantages and pitfalls. Potential difficulties might be introduced into the interpretation, especially when contradictory information emerges from different sources.

The adoption of appropriate methods is also important for facilitating positive relationships with children, so that they can be better supported in expressing their views. To provide more space for children to exercise their rights and agency, I intend to explore participatory methods with children, which have not been applied in research related to the implementation of LRC. I am aware that 'participatory methods' should not be seen as automatically leading to children's authentic voices, and thus it is necessary to avoid treating children's responses in these activities as essentially true (Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014).

There have been many creative methods in child research such as photography (Miles & Kaplan, 2005), guided tours (Stalker, 1998), drawing (Chambers, Machalepis & Mojica, 2010), or 'message in the bottle' (Messiou, 2012). In Appendix-B, I have summarised several common methods with their advantages and potential issues, drawing on both theoretical rationales and researchers' experiences of applying these methods in real life. Sometimes, methods could be combined and integrated. For example, the photo-elicitation interview involves ideas from both photography and interview. I chose the methods that could serve my research focus, which was on children's experiences of inclusion and exclusion. The methods also had to be accepted in Chinese schooling contexts. For instance, although child-led photography without adult supervision has gained popularity (Aldridge, 2012), such activity might be seen as interrupting the school's schedule of teaching and learning, and also goes against the established rule in Chinese schools that pupils should not use any personal technology product during school hours. Besides participant observation, in the formal study, I carried out guided tours (Stalker, 1998), photo-

elicitation interviews and ‘seed in a pot’ with children. The rationale for choosing a specific method and the evaluation of its usage are discussed in section 5.3.2.

#### 4.2.2.4 Researching with disabled children

Disabled children’s voices could be readily marginalised and unheard if a researcher fails to provide a supportive structure (Davis & Watson, 2000). The methodological ‘difficulties’ could be used to justify the exclusion of disabled children even from child research (Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014). As with the impulse to use ‘child-friendly’ methods (Punch, 2002), there might also be an assumption that researching with disabled children definitely requires significantly different methods from those used with adults or non-disabled children. I argue that such an assumption is also derived from a normative discourse that positions disabled children as ‘different’ children, who are not even competent to share their views. Instead, they should be seen as persons with competence and agency beyond their impairments (Connors & Stalker, 2007). Much empirical research has shown that disabled children (even those with severe impairments) were able to perform as their own gatekeepers when careful consideration was given to methodology and methods (e.g. Cefai & Cooper, 2010; Gray & Winter, 2011; Lewis, Davison, Ellins, Niblett, Parsons, Robertson & Sharpe, 2007; Mortier et al., 2011; Nutbrown & Clough, 2009; Wright, 2008).

I consider that researching with disabled children requires an extension of all the main principles of researching with children, rather than a completely different approach. Below is a discussion of the techniques that could be used to support children to overcome the impediments presented by their impairments (Morris, 2003).

To begin with, I stress that disabled children should not be treated as a homogeneous group. There could be various issues about research methods or arrangements that need to be considered given children’s impairments. For example, methods like interviews might be seen as more accessible for children with physical impairments than for those with intellectual impairments. The former group of children might require mobility assistance to participate in research, while the latter might experience difficulties in concentrating on research activities. Also, researching with

deaf children might involve complicated procedures for finding and using interpreters (Harr, 2001; Lewis & Porter, 2007). Methods like 'Talking Mats' or other non-verbal methods are more likely to be used with children who have severe intellectual or speech impairments. Additional difficulties could be involved in interpreting the meaning of participation by children with profound and multiple learning difficulties (Porter, Ouvry, Morgan & Downs, 2001; Ware, 2004). The disabled children involved in this research were identified as having learning difficulties. They were already studying in regular schools and they relied on verbal communication in their daily lives. Thus the following discussion focuses on relevant issues of research with children who have intellectual impairments.

In this research, it has been extremely important to recognise disabled children's competence and reaffirm the value of their voices. I was especially careful not to subject children to assumptions about what they could and could not accomplish based solely on information about their age, disability conditions, or other adults' perceptions and comments. Porter (2009) noted that research activities should be made meaningful to children by conveying to them the message of how valuable their opinions are. Disabled children could be very sensitive to being patronised, so I was careful not to impose an incompetent or inadequate image on them but to show high expectations (Booth & Booth, 1996; Rodgers, 1999; Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014). Such a principle should also apply to the interpretation of children's responses. For example, rather than automatically treating children's silence as a product of their impairments, such behaviour might represent children's exercise of agency: they might find the research activity uninteresting, or feel uncomfortable when confronting researchers. Additionally, because teachers tended to speak for disabled children, I decided to maintain a critical perspective on their accounts of children's abilities, a strategy similar to that of Rodgers (1999). I learned about the child participants gradually through observation and my interactions with them.

Given the intellectual demands of conducting academic research, my role as a 'non-disabled' ally tends to be legitimised in research about children with learning difficulties (Chappell, 2000; Walmsley, 2001). Although an advisory group of disabled people might be established to guide and oversee disability research (Nind,

2008), I did not make such arrangement mainly because there was still a lack of personnel or organisations with sufficient experience and skill to perform such a role (Stalker, 1998). To support children's decision-making, Snelgrove (2005) taught children with moderate or severe learning difficulties about research and ethics-related concepts, and offered practice and skills to support participation. During this research, I also tried to be 'educational' so as to familiarise the child participants with the idea of research.

Researchers have offered quite extensive and detailed advice on appropriate research methods with disabled children, which overlapped with the methods generally used in child research. For example, Lewis and Porter (2007) recommended several methods as suitable for children with learning difficulties such as observation, individual/small group interviews and prompted methods. Snelgrove (2005) found that gathering naturally occurring data worked better than interviews because the latter might make children feel stressful. It has been consistently acknowledged that visual supports like photos, pictures or symbols could help facilitate and stimulate the thinking and understanding of children and adults with intellectual impairments, and make research activities more accessible for people with verbal challenges (Booth & Booth, 2003; Porter, 2009; Rodgers, 1999; Snelgrove, 2005; Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014).

Finally, specific attention should be given to useful techniques and strategies for facilitating communication with disabled children. Below is a brief summary of the main debates on this issue. The suggestions certainly have limitations because researchers drew their conclusions based on various theoretical stances and particular research contexts. While applying these techniques, I also stayed flexible and responsive towards how to engage with each child.

- *Give time.* Researchers should take time to become familiar with children and build rapport. Children need to be given sufficient time to think about how they are going to respond, and the research should be conducted at a slower pace by, for example, arranging for fewer activities to take place at one time (Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014).



- *Ask open/closed questions.* Researchers tend to suggest that open questions are more suitable for interviewing children with learning difficulties, because these children might be prone to suggestibility and make biased choices over alternatives like 'Yes/No' (Lewis, 2004; Lewis & Porter, 2007; Porter, 2009; Rodgers, 1999). However, the debate over question type seems to be inconclusive. Both open and closed questions could have their own advantages (Dockrell, 2004). General questions might not help to gain quality data (Connors & Stalker, 2007). It has also been argued that it is still necessary to use closed questions when interviewing less articulate participants, to achieve better understanding by eliminating some options (Booth & Booth, 1996). Providing pictures for children to represent their answers may help overcome the problems involved in asking closed questions (Lewis, 2004).
- *Avoid repeating questions.* When needed, researchers should rephrase questions in a different way rather than repeating them (Lewis, 2004; Porter, 2009; Rodgers, 1999). Repeating questions might make children assume that their answers are not correct, a reaction they have learned from common school practices (Lewis, 2004).
- *Seek stories.* It has been found more productive to ask children about stories and examples (Lewis & Porter, 2004; Rodgers, 1999). Open prompts could be helpful, such as 'Tell me more about that' (Porter, 2009). However, difficulties might be encountered in giving specifics such as dates, numbers, quantity or frequency (Booth & Booth, 1996; Rodgers, 1999), and in recalling events well enough to offer detailed and fluent reports (Dockrell, 2004). Researchers need to support children in recalling their past experiences and filling in details (Greenstein, 2016), without pressuring or confusing them. Talking about events that they have been involved in could help to gain more information (Dockrell, 2004).
- *Respect silence.* Children's silence in interviews should be accepted, respected and listened to (Booth & Booth, 2009; Lewis & Porter, 2007). It is necessary to let children know that they have the option of saying 'I don't know' (Lewis, 2004).

So far I have discussed several key methodological issues connected with ways of researching children, such as negotiating research relations, communicating effectively and choosing suitable methods. Acknowledging the commonalities of researching with disabled children and other children, I further discussed how to make a research project inclusive for disabled children, especially those with intellectual impairments. All in all, it is my responsibility as a researcher to construct an appropriate research context for children (Porter, 2014), because data are generated through my interactions with children (Guba & Lincoln, 1988). During this research, I promoted disabled children's participation by ensuring their rights to make informed decisions, taking time to build rapport, adopting specific techniques to support children's communication, making a range of research methods available, consulting children about research arrangements, and recognising their competence and agency.

### 4.3 Research design

Informed by my personal experiences and the knowledge gap regarding the implementation of LRC policy, this research aims at exploring the current status of disabled children's inclusion in Shanghai's regular schools. Central to the inquiry is the principle of underlining disabled children's voices, while teachers' views should also be sought. I formulated the research questions to examine how disabled children and their teachers view, experience and negotiate these children's learning and participation. In section 4.2, consistent with the theoretical framework for this research, I illustrated my epistemological stance as social and transformative constructivism, and the methodological implications of researching *with* children. Then I asked, how could I best answer the research questions? What would be the most suitable approach and how should I devise the research procedure? What kind of data should be collected and how to analyse them?

#### *Qualitative and explorative research*

The recognition that knowledge is constructed through social interactions reveals the importance of examining the language and actions of disabled children and their teachers in order to understand their meanings and perspectives. I consider

qualitative design the most suitable for this inquiry, though I agree that epistemological stances do not necessarily stipulate a choice between ‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’ (Burr, 2015; Pathirage et al., 2008).

Quantitative design such as survey research is unhelpful for my inquiry for several reasons. First, it tends to reduce the complexity of the schooling process to abstracted and static measurements. Instead, I am interested in the holistic, naturalistic and everyday process in which disabled children and teachers construct and shape their meanings, which are not pre-occupied by people as entities. This can be better achieved by gaining rich data about what disabled children and their teachers say and do in their daily school lives, which entails the use of methods like observation and interviews. Second, quantitative research might be more useful in investigating causal relationships among variables (Creswell, 2012), but instead, I am seeking a better understanding of and deeper insight into the phenomenon of disabled children’s learning and participation in regular schools. Third, while quantitative research is considered cost-efficient for a larger sample, it also leaves little space for interpretation and explanation from participants. In particular, survey research could be less suitable for children because of challenges in understanding written texts and the unlikelihood of the survey being individualised. Finally, in quantitative research, a researcher’s role is often detached and authoritative in relation to the researched. By contrast, in this research, to learn about disabled children’s and teachers’ views and experiences and gain an alternative representation to that in the existing literature, I should engage with their lives and listen to their real concerns through balanced power relations. This requires me to be reflexive about my role in the research process, rather than denying influences stemming from my subjectivity.

Therefore, this research was designed to be qualitative, with the aim of providing a rich description of the everyday language, dialogues, behaviours, interactions and events in regular schools that shape disabled children’s learning and participation. Although explanations and relations were explored to interpret the underlying assumptions and beliefs, this research did not seek to assert accurate predictions, causal relationships or empirical generalisations. This inquiry is also in a sense exploratory as regards two aspects. First, as discussed in Chapter 2, little is known

about the status of inclusion of disabled children in Chinese regular schools, and there has been very limited research on the implementation of LRC that has adopted a qualitative design or involved disabled children as participants. Therefore, there has inevitably been a high level of uncertainty about what I might encounter throughout the research process, a factor which highlights the importance of flexibility. Second, this research is intended to act as a step towards exploring issues relevant to disabled children's inclusion in education in China, and thus to provide a foundation of understandings that will be useful and illuminating for future research.

### *Inductive and deductive processes*

What's the relationship between data and theory in this research? It has been argued that an inductive approach is almost synonymous with social constructionist research, while a deductive approach is seen as equivalent to positivist research (Gill & Johnson, 2002). In simple words, the inductive process is supposed to move from what's observed or heard to the formulation of concepts, ideas and theories, while the deductive process is supposed to move from pre-structured theories to empirical testing and examination (Pathirage et al., 2008). This inquiry, on its surface, would certainly involve the inductive process, given my intention to approach better understandings through analysing the qualitative data gained from disabled children and their teachers. It is often asserted that qualitative researchers should avoid imposing any predefined concepts when they start data collection (Gibson, 2010). However, I argue that it is problematic to assume that any research can be purely inductive or deductive (Hammersley, 2002; Pathirage et al., 2008). In this research, both inductive and deductive processes were present in a hybrid relationship (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Figure 4.1 demonstrates the iterative research process, showing how literature and theories, methodological decisions and my interpretation of the research findings interact with each other.

Before starting data collection, I had already formulated research questions and theoretical assumptions and propositions, such as the potential implications of pupil voice for the development of inclusive practice (as discussed in section 3.4.1). To enable me to remain focused on the issues surrounding disabled children's learning

and participation, I adopted the *Framework for Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) to guide my data collection in regular schools (see section 4.3.1). Thus, at the early stage, the deductive process was salient, shedding light on which aspects of schooling should be looked at.

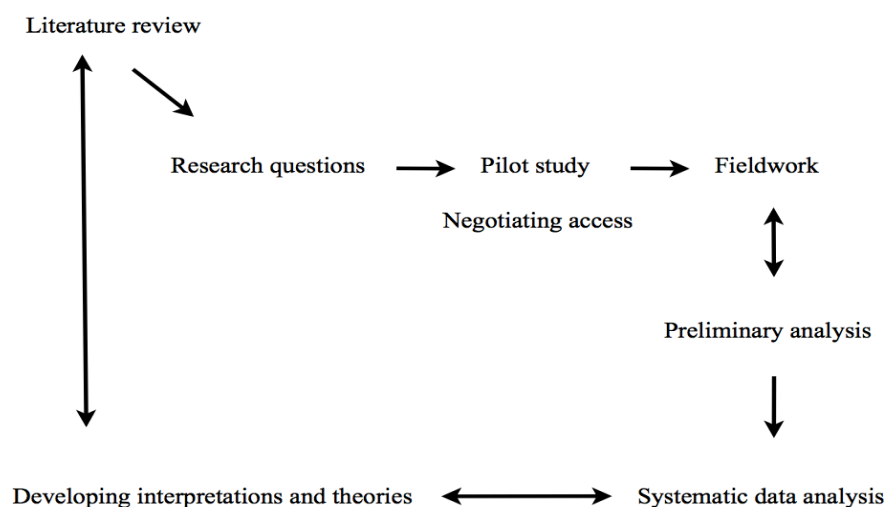


Figure 4.1 The iterative research process

Nevertheless, I was aware that I needed to retain openness to what might possibly be learned from participants in this particular research context. I embraced the uncertainties of fieldwork to avoid being restricted by my assumptions, because what was important to participants might be quite different. For example, based on what I encountered in schools, I collected more information about some unexpected issues such as disabled children's and their teachers' perceptions of resource classrooms.

The inductive process became prominent when I was immersing myself in the gathered data. I aimed to ground the research in local contexts and construct my interpretation *from* rather than *with* the data (Murchison, 2010). I went back and forth among data, literature, and my interpretations. Later I returned to the *Framework of Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) to structure the presentation of the research findings, a deductive process which helped me to achieve a much clearer representation of the current status of disabled children's learning and participation in Shanghai's regular schools.

### *Introducing the research procedure*

This inquiry has been located in social and transformative constructivism. I strived to conduct the research *with* disabled children, a process which was facilitated through balanced research relations, effective communication and the adoption of suitable methods and techniques. This research was qualitative and exploratory, employing the ethnographic approach to gain a richly described, in-depth and reflexive representation. The *Framework for Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) was adapted as a research tool to inform the collection and analysis of data. Great attention was given to ethics throughout the research to promote children's participation and protect them from harm.

Multiple methods were chosen for collecting qualitative data, including participant observation in classrooms and schools, participatory activities with disabled children, and interviews with teachers. A pilot study was considered necessary to familiarise myself with school life in Shanghai and verify the effectiveness of the methods. Following the pilot study, amendments were made to the types of participatory activities for children (see Appendix-C). Due to the difficulties encountered in gaining access to schools and obtaining adults' consent before reaching out to disabled children, this research followed convenience sampling to try to include all available participants who were willing to take part. I recruited 11 children with learning difficulties, 10 class teachers and 3 resource teachers from 4 state primary schools in Shanghai (see section 5.2). The sample was kept small to facilitate the collection of in-depth data.

As shown in figure 4.2, after securing access, I started to visit the participating schools. I first spent time carrying out participant observation to document disabled children's participation in lessons and activities, building rapport with children and teachers, and engaging them in informal talks about their experiences of school life. During this period, I also took photos of children's everyday lessons and activities, which were prepared as prompts for interviews. Once the children were comfortable with my presence, multiple participatory activities were carried out with them to elicit their views, including guided tours, photo-elicitation interviews and 'seed in a pot', with the assistance of symbol signs. Towards the end of the fieldwork, semi-

structured interviews were conducted with teachers. Fieldnotes were written up to document my observations, and interviews with participants were recorded. The methods and process of data collection are further discussed in section 5.4.

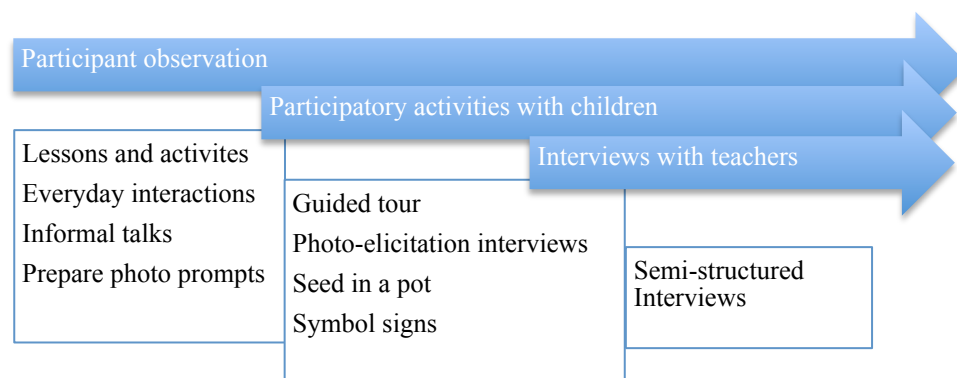


Figure 4.2 The procedure of the fieldwork

The process of analysis is illustrated in figure 4.3. Although presented in a linear style loosely following a timeline, the process was inherently iterative. Preliminary analysis took place during the fieldwork, which also led me to look for more information on interesting, prominent and relevant issues. More systematic data analysis was performed after completing the fieldwork, by coding, identifying significant events and integrating different data sets. The presentation of findings was structured by following the *Framework for Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). The approach to data analysis is described in section 5.3.

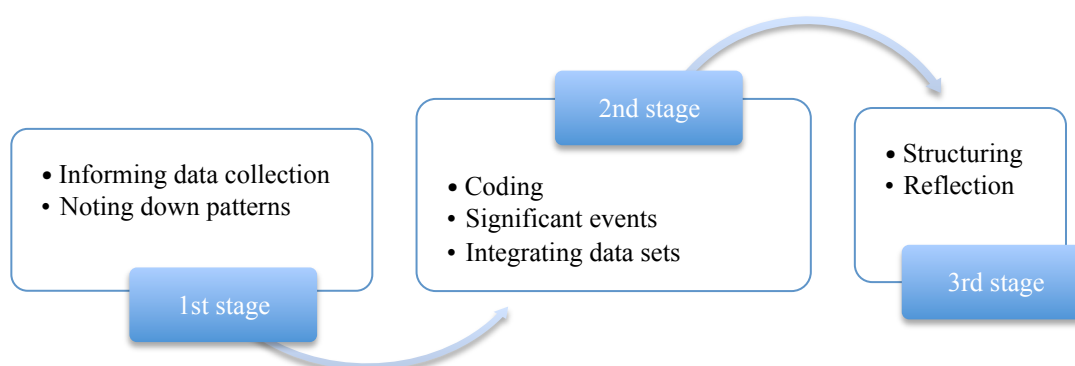


Figure 4.3 The process of analysing data

### 4.3.1 Framework for Participation as a research tool

As a novice to the kind of research that demanded examination of the everyday schooling process in the real world, I felt in need of better guidance on working through the overwhelming developments in the field (Stake, 1995), which could help reduce possible omissions and indicate what to look at and what to ask about disabled children's learning and participation.

Although the *Index for Inclusion* (Booth et al., 2000) has been recognised as a comprehensive guideline to help schools develop inclusive practice, it is more of a self-evaluation instrument and does not focus on examining the status quo of inclusive education (Black-Hawkins, 2010). Instead, the *Framework for Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) that I have introduced in Chapter 3 was developed as a research tool (Black-Hawkins, 2010). I consider it to be more suitable for this inquiry because first, it is coherent with the theoretical framework, in matters such as perceiving disabled children as full persons, addressing the subtle difference between special and inclusive provision, or underlining the importance of disabled children's achievements in schools; second, it does not serve as a simplistic checklist but as encouragement to researchers to ask open-ended questions about the complex process of inclusion and exclusion in schools' local contexts (Black-Hawkins, 2010); and third, it does restrict the research focus but can be used flexibly to cater to specific research interests and accommodate various methods (Black-Hawkins, 2010). Before deciding to use the framework, I also reflected on the findings on children's educational experiences from other research (e.g. Kenny & Shevlin, 2001; Lewis et al., 2007; Wilson, 2004) to estimate whether the framework might restrict the breadth and depth of information that I could collect. I recognised that using the framework was unlikely to have such impacts.

#### *Adapting the framework*

The framework was not originally set out for the purpose of listening to children's voices, although pupils were mentioned alongside other adults as key stakeholders. In the research that applied the framework, teachers' views and practices were



clearly the prominent focus. Since this research aimed to promote and privilege pupil voice, I needed to make necessary adaptations to the framework.

As shown in table 4.1, the main structure of the framework remained the same, but the pupil voice agenda was stressed. For example, in addressing the element of ‘collaboration’, I was especially interested in exploring whether and how teachers learn with and from children. More questions were integrated into the framework such as whether disabled children’s voices were heard in decision-making and how teachers promoted or hindered disabled children’s participation. Although the views of only one group of children would be sought, I remained alert to whether all children’s participation and achievement were being supported. Having adopted a transformative stance, it was important for me to keep thinking about what could be done differently in practice.

In addition, I need to be sensitive to the contextual differences in Chinese schools when applying a research tool generated from a Northern context. Although the framework provides detailed guidance on collecting evidence in schools, Black-Hawkins et al. (2007) noted that this was not meant to be followed exactly. Thus I used the guidance as reference but did not strictly follow it. For example, many schooling policies and practices that are commonly seen in Northern schools could be unavailable in Chinese schools, such as pastoral care or the deployment of teaching assistants. I was careful to not overlook what could be significant in Chinese schools, such as children’s participation in looking after their classrooms (*Zhiri*).

### *Using the framework*

The framework has been used for different purposes at different stages of the research. It was first used in a heuristic way to illuminate and guide my data collection in schools. While trying to stay open to what I encountered in the fieldwork and to document what I heard and saw, I collected information about how the four elements of participation – access, collaboration, achievement and diversity – were reflected in the schooling process (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011).

Table 4.1 The research tool

Elements	Questions to reflect on
<p>Participation and access: being there</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Joining the school and the class</li> <li>- Staying in the school and the class</li> <li>- Access to spaces and places</li> <li>- Access to the curriculum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Who gives access to the child participants? Who denies their access?</li> <li>- What are the policies, practices and interactions that promote the child participants' access? What are the policies, practices and interactions that reinforce barriers to access?</li> <li>- Why, within the culture (values and beliefs) of the school and the class, is access promoted for these children? Why, within the culture (values and beliefs) of the school and the class, do barriers to access exist?</li> </ul>
<p>Participation and collaboration: learning together</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Children learning together</li> <li>- Teachers learning with and from children</li> <li>- Teachers learning with each other</li> <li>- Teachers learning from the community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Who are learning together? Who are not learning together? Especially, do the child participants learn together with their peers? Do teachers learn from the child participants?</li> <li>- What are the policies, practices and interactions that promote collaboration? What are the policies, practices and interactions that reinforce barriers to collaboration?</li> <li>- Why, within the culture (values and beliefs) of the school and the class, is collaboration promoted? Why, within the culture (values and beliefs) of the school and the class, do barriers to collaboration exist?</li> </ul>
<p>Participation and achievement: inclusive pedagogy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Children's achievement and aspirations</li> <li>- Teachers' knowledge, beliefs and practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do the child participants achieve?</li> <li>- What are the teaching strategies/practices that promote the child participants' achievement? What are the teaching strategies/practices that reinforce barriers to the child participants' achievement?</li> <li>- Why, within the culture (values and beliefs) of the school and the class, do the child participants achieve? Why, within the culture (values and beliefs) of the school and the class, do barriers to the child participants' achievement exist?</li> </ul>
<p>Participation and diversity: recognition and acceptance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recognition and acceptance of children, by children</li> <li>- Recognition and acceptance of children, by staff</li> <li>- Recognition and acceptance of staff, by staff</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are the child participants recognised and accepted as persons?</li> <li>- What are the policies, practices and interactions that promote recognition and acceptance? What are the policies, practices and interactions that reinforce barriers to recognition and acceptance?</li> <li>- Why, within the culture (values and beliefs) of the school and the class, are recognition and acceptance promoted? Why, within the culture (values and beliefs) of the school and the class, do barriers to recognition and acceptance exist?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Are the child participants' voices heard in the decision-making processes? Do their voices count equally with others'?</li> <li>- What are teachers' roles in promoting or hindering the child participants' participation?</li> <li>- How about other children? To what extent are participation and achievement realised for all?</li> <li>- What could be done differently?</li> </ul> <p>Adapted from the <i>Framework for Participation</i> (Florian &amp; Black-Hawkins, 2011)</p>	

Certainly, less information was gained on certain aspects of the framework that were less relevant to my research focus; for example, I learned little about collaboration among regular teachers and how schools worked with other institutions. Also, I did not examine schools' performance tables and official self-reports issued for inspection. Later, with extremely 'messy' codes and categories at hand, generated from inductive analysis, I used the framework to help structure the research findings, which led to a better representation of the status of disabled children's inclusion in Shanghai's regular schools.

### *Evaluation*

Given its necessary adaptation and flexible application, the adoption of the *Framework for Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) has facilitated this inquiry effectively, especially in regard to data collection and analysis. It enabled me to locate disabled children's voices in the complexity of schooling contexts, so that deeper insights were gained into what facilitators and barriers were shaping these children's learning and participation on a daily basis. The framework could be used flexibly to serve the research focus on disabled children's voices in relation to their learning and participation. In turn, including children's perspectives considerably enriched the information about the schooling process that it was possible to collect following the framework. Finally, in spite of its appearance as a tool from a Northern/Western context, the framework does not aim to impose any assumed model of inclusive practice but to support researchers or practitioners in asking questions about their local realities.

#### **4.3.2 Adopting the ethnographic approach**

There are various approaches associated with qualitative research design, and I chose the ethnographic approach as the most suitable way to describe the nature of this inquiry. The notion of ethnography itself is certainly hard to define. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), although ethnography has its roots in anthropology, it has been contextualised across disciplines underpinned by various theoretical ideas; as a result of this complex history, a universal definition is missing. Briefly, ethnography is 'the study of social interactions, behaviours, and perceptions

that occur within groups, teams, organisations, and communities' (Reeves, Kuper & Hodges, 2008: 512).

This research can be defined as ethnographic for its intention to gain a deep understanding of disabled children's everyday school lives and what's underpinning their status of learning and participation, the characteristics of its research process as flexible and opening, the adopted methods such as participant observation to collect qualitative data and its product of a reflexive representation. To clarify, I deliberately use the notion of 'ethnographic' rather than coining this research as an 'ethnography' in its traditional sense underpinned by anthropology; the current research has been informed by ethnographic attributes and techniques (Whitehead, 2004, 2005) and it could be seen as a more 'focused' inquiry with limited time spent in the site and more narrowly defined research questions (Chesnay, 2015).

Since so little is known about how disabled children have been taught, have learned and have participated in Chinese regular schools, this research was driven by my strong commitment to 'being there' (Murchison, 2010: 12) and to collecting 'firsthand information' (p. 4) about disabled children's everyday schooling experiences in 'naturally occurring settings' (Brewer, 2000: 6) by 'watching what happens, listening to what is said' and 'asking questions' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 1). Embracing the complexity of the schooling process in shaping disabled children's inclusion and exclusion, the research aimed to gain a holistic representation by interpreting participants' meanings and actions in contexts rather than to analyse 'factors' in isolation. Also, this ethnographic account was not 'complete' or 'finished' so as to claim the only truth, but to gain insights and open up space for future inquiries.

With the understanding that knowledge is constructed through people's daily interactions, it is essential to examine schooling processes to identify the prevailing values, beliefs and practices in relation to disabled children's learning and participation (Black-Hawkins et al., 2007; Davis et al., 2008). Everyday school life is likely to look conventional, mundane and even boring. Nevertheless, the essence of ethnographic inquiry is to distort and problematise ordinary lives; or, as perfectly expressed by Silverman (2011): to see 'the remarkable in the mundane' (p. 6) and

‘the mundane in the remarkable’ (p. 9). Ethnographic interpretation thus ‘is a significant *development* of the ordinary modes of making sense of the social world that we all use in our everyday lives, in a manner that is attuned to the specific purposes of producing research knowledge’ (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 4); moreover, ‘ethnography exploits the capacity that any social actor possesses for learning new cultures...’ (p. 9). Deploying an ethnographic lens meant that I could keep scrutinising why schooling had to be carried out in one way rather than in another. In this research, I should ask: Why should the marginalisation and exclusion of disabled children be legitimised and considered ‘normal’ as if nothing worth noticing were taking place?

In addition, the ethnographic approach could effectively facilitate fieldwork, as ‘a process of discovery, making inferences, and continuing inquiry’ (Whitehead, 2005). Time and space could be better secured for building rapport and mutual trust with disabled children and their teachers so as to balance power relations (James & Prout, 1990; Robinson & Kellett, 2004). The ethnographic approach is also strengthened by its ability to accommodate multiple and diverse methods (Walsh, 2004; Whitehead, 2005). As mentioned before in section 4.2.2.3, multiple methods could be beneficial by enabling the research to be more inclusive and responsive to every child, while participants’ perspectives could be better understood by drawing on different sources of data.

Overall, the ethnographic approach could enable me to address what I considered important and necessary for answering the research questions. I will illustrate the process of fieldwork, including sampling, gaining access, and collecting and recording data, in section 5.2.

### 4.3.3 Reflexivity and researcher identity

Central to the quality of ethnographic research is reflexivity (Reeves et al., 2008) - the process whereby a researcher ‘constantly scrutinises the production of data, considering potential sources of error, and evaluating his or her own role’ (Foster, 1996: 91). Mills and Morton (2013) stressed that it was reflexivity that made the ethnographic approach more than an instrumental means of data collection.

Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) also argued that reflexivity had many relevant methodological implications for ethnographic research, because a researcher's actions inevitably became part of the constructions of social reality, which in turn continuously shaped his/her decisions in the field. For this research, I acknowledge that the representation of disabled children's learning and participation in Shanghai's regular schools is situated in its particular context along with my participation in its co-construction and interpretation.

The principle of reflexivity requires a researcher to engage him/herself in examination of the 'research-member relationship' regardless of what specific methods are adopted (Descombe, 1983). It is almost common sense that school members would respond to me in different ways based on their own perceptions, as described by Ball (1983) when observing that 'actors respond to others, in part at least, on the basis of such personal perceptions. People will say things, tell things, hold things back according to how they perceive "the other"' (p. 87). My own biography, subjectivity and identity could inevitably influence the kind of data that I could gain from the fieldwork. Reactivity should not be seen as a 'problem' that needs to be removed, but as an informative phenomenon that can be exploited (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). I kept reflecting on how my researcher identity was constructed and negotiated, and its impacts on the research.

As a stranger to the participants and schools, I negotiated the way to gain access to their worlds through a process of 'being and becoming' a researcher (Giampapa, 2011). I started my fieldwork more as an outsider, since I had no formal role in the school communities and was not familiar with any of the participants. Assumptions about one's membership might be drawn through comparing similarities or differences between researchers' and participants' identities, which often influence the field relationships (Bryne, 2004; Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Kee, Ntseane & Muhamad, 2001). Kerstetter (2012) found that a researcher's geographic location, socioeconomic status, demographic characteristics and life experience could have impacts. Thus, when first meeting people in schools, I tried to highlight commonalities between us (Ergun & Erdemir, 2010). For example, I often told

teachers that I had lived in Shanghai for 7 years and had gone to the teacher education university, which was quite familiar to them.

Besides the potential difficulties in gaining participants' trust, there seemed to be some benefits as an outsider (Kerstetter, 2012). For example, I may have faced a relatively lower risk of 'going native' and thus losing my critical lens. Also, my 'naive' inquiry about even the most 'ordinary' aspects of schooling could be understood by school members: I was accepted as a nerdy researcher who insisted on lingering around, sitting at the back of a classroom and talking to children and teachers.

However, as Thomson and Gunter (2011) pointed out, the traditional dichotomy of insider/outsider was mainly 'an act of sense-making' (p. 27). Soon enough, my researcher identity fell into the space in-between and became very complex and fluid (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Merriam et al., 2001). I was an insider and an outsider at the same time, and what should be asked is: What was it that I became an insider/outsider of?

During the fieldwork, I did not encounter much difficulty in building rapport with children though I had expected it to be hard. The key was to act differently from teachers (Maybin, 2006), who often criticised pupils over exam results or discipline issues. Being non-judgemental, friendly, approachable and curious enabled me to be quickly accepted by children; I was always surrounded by them during breaks. Nevertheless, there were more complicated issues about my researcher identity in this study. Table 4.2 provides an unpacking of my complex researcher identity, which showed impacts on the research process in matters such as gaining access, negotiating field relations and generating data. It should be noted that no characteristic played its role independently from others; multidimensional intersections were involved (Kerstetter, 2012). In the following paragraphs, I will discuss four specific issues that reflected more significant influences.

Table 4.2 Complexity of researcher identity

Demography	Social position	Profession	Region
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Female</li> <li>- Non-disabled</li> <li>- Adult</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inspector</li> <li>- Student</li> <li>- Common person</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Special educator</li> <li>- Psychologist</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Half-Shanghainess</li> <li>- Westernised</li> </ul>

### *Undercover inspector*

Gaining access in ethnographic research is a difficult process (Walford, 2008). This research demanded a high level of commitment from schools in terms of allowing me to observe what was happening inside school gates, to talk to people and to make use of school hours for research activities. Moreover, it was relatively uncommon to see this type of research in Chinese schools, where teachers were more accustomed to filling in questionnaires. During initial meetings, I was even asked by one headteacher: ‘Can you finish your research in one day?’

As a research student who was not affiliated with any local school in Shanghai, it was reasonable for headteachers to check whether this research was endorsed by LEAs. After Mr Liang, the director of the SEGC from the participating jurisdiction liaised with schools on my behalf, all the contacted schools set up initial meetings so I could meet headteachers, special education coordinators, and resource teachers. I was aware that school members could be cautious and suspicious about the purpose of the research because I was introduced through the authority. Their main concern would be that I might be an ‘undercover’ inspector, which could make a big difference to what I could access within schools. For example, even if I were allowed to visit the schools, teachers might feel pressured to ‘perform’ what they were doing for disabled children, or the research might create an extra workload, which could result in teachers’ resistance to cooperation. In such a situation, I would fail to learn what was really going on in disabled children’s everyday school lives.

Thus, I made sure that I allayed people’s concerns by presenting myself as a student who genuinely wanted to listen to children and teachers. The example below shows the dramatic change in one headteacher’s attitudes after her doubts were removed:



After a while, the headteacher suddenly throws out a question: 'Is this your own project?' I reply: 'Yes.' It finally dawns on her that Mr Liang was only acting as a middleman. Later she delightfully goes to the office downstairs and says to the special education coordinator: 'You have made a mistake. This is just a little girl doing her dissertation. What she writes and sees will not be known to the upper-levels.'

(Fieldnotes, 12/11/2013)

The headteacher in the above example moved away from an official discourse (Thøgersen, 2008) and started to share the difficulties faced by the school and how the LEA had been unhelpful. Differentiating myself from LEAs could have resulted in more difficulties in gaining access to schools because it indeed mattered little to schools if they turned down my personal request. However, I considered it important to be honest because I did not want to gain access simply to the picture that schools often presented to inspectors. After stressing my identity as a student, I was seen and welcomed as one of the common people (*Laobaixing*).

After securing initial access to schools, I continued to try to find out whether I was perceived as an inspector. Although headteachers often suggested which teachers I could contact, their choices seemed to be based on practical considerations rather than on the wish to nominate 'good' teachers. For example, I was advised not to recruit the final year pupils and teachers because they were preparing for exams. Thus I was able to observe a range of inclusive and exclusionary practices. Teachers were also reassured that this research was not any form of inspection.

### *Female researcher meeting female participants*

Ergun and Erdemir (2010) noted that female researchers tended to be accepted as non-threatening, caring and protective. Being a young female may have facilitated gaining consent from families. All the teacher participants were female, which was not surprising given the gender imbalance in primary schools. Although I tried to achieve a relatively equal proportion of male and female child participants, I felt more 'naturally' connected and close to girls, which might have led to the result that 8 of the 11 child participants were girls while many of the boys refused to take part. Moreover, during the fieldwork, in my talks with female participants, topics such as differences in educational expectations of girls and boys, tensions between female

teachers' professional and family lives, and parenting, came up. These personal stories might not have been shared if it had not been assumed that I could understand them because of also being a female.

### *Special educator in regular schools*

Does it make any difference in carrying out research about inclusion in regular schools to be someone who is perceived as a specialist in psychology and special education? After teachers were informed that my research was about disabled children, I was almost immediately seen as a person who visited schools to help solve problems. On many occasions teachers consulted me about the 'troubling' children in their classrooms and I was even asked to attend parent meetings to offer advice. I had to make it clear to teachers that it was not my role to meet such requests. Moreover, once I arrived in schools, I was allocated into the group with resource teachers and special education coordinators, confirming Walsh's (2004) observation that, once entering a school community, a researcher would be directed to the 'existing networks of friendship, enmity and territory' (p. 231). Nevertheless, regular teachers somehow kept their distance from me, even though I wanted to build rapport with them to find out how they understood and negotiated disabled children's inclusion in regular classrooms. However, the potential reasons for such a situation could vary. Some regular teachers found my research less relevant to them because there seemed to be a division that regular teachers took care of the majority of pupils, while special teachers were responsible for special children. By contrast, the more inclusive regular teachers were less welcoming because they did not favor the idea of differentiating disabled children from the rest of the pupils. When I realised that being too closely associated with special educators could become an obstacle to my access to regular teachers, I made clearer my neutral position as a researcher in order to balance the relationships with both groups of teachers.

### *Westernised Chinese*

The final issue, which I did not fully expect before starting the fieldwork, arose from my identity as an international student who was perceived as having adopted a Western lens, although being Chinese had many benefits for me in conducting

research in Chinese schools. Cui (2015) encountered resistance from Chinese participants, as a Chinese student who was studying abroad and returned to China for fieldwork. Wang (2013) noted that Chinese participants might question research methods that were perceived as foreign or ethically problematic. Thomson and Gunter (2011) suggested that researcher identities were becoming 'highly liquid, porous, unbounded' in these 'globalised and heterogeneous times' (p. 27). Sometimes, I seemed to have become an 'outsider in one's own land' (Ergun & Erdemir, 2010).

During the process of gaining consent from participants, I encountered the clash between western normative practice and local interpretations, as regards signing the consent forms (Riessman, 2005). In every initial meeting with headteachers, the person looked shocked when I took out a pile of consent letters. Two headteachers noted that sending such letters to parents, letters which included a description of potential risks to children, might jeopardise the established family-school relationship – as if the schools had agreed to some 'dodgy' research and parents needed to sign the form in order to assume responsibility for any consequences. As a result of negotiation with the headteachers, who believed that signing consent forms was merely a bureaucratic formality of western universities, oral communication with teachers and parents took place first before handing over the letters. Still, one teacher commented that leaving one's signature was often associated with 'wrong doings'. One mother even asked to see me after reading the form; it turned out that, although she wanted her child to participate, she simply could not understand why she had to sign the form.

I faced the dilemma that on the one hand, besides being subject to the ethical regulation, it was my intention to better inform participants about the research and its potential impacts. Given that rigorous oversight on ethics was lacking in China, I considered it necessary to increase participants' awareness of ethical issues connected with involving children as participants. On the other hand, such a practice might make people feel suspicious or worried, and it would be regrettable if people refused to take part in the research only because of this confusing practice. Similar experiences were shared by researchers who conducted their research in international

contexts, such as Riessman (2005). She argued that the notion of ‘ethics-in-context’ should be promoted to explore the divergent understandings of ethics. I further argue that it is not enough to either follow the western procedure or the culturally accepted practice, because without reflexive and critical examination, either might lead to unwanted harmful consequences for participants. I agree also with Robinson-Pant and Singal’s (2013) view that a researcher should reflect on both legalistic perspectives and cultural norms in order to negotiate research ethics.

My ‘western’ identity also had impacts on my relations with people in the field. Miles et al. (2014) described the situation in which field researchers might not be able to avoid doing wrong to one party or another. In this research, I put disabled children’s interests as the priority, which might upset teachers as shown below.

Lian’s (a child participant) class is picked to participate in a TV programme shooting, during which pupils are asked to be enthusiastically exploring the building for functional classrooms, where the resource classroom is also located. The purpose of the show is to exhibit the school’s commitment to provide extra-curricular activities.

One day before the formal shooting, children are asked to do a rehearsal, for which they have to skip one lesson and stay outside on a severe-pollution day. I am with the class and I see how girls mimic the way Lian speaks in front of her. When the formal shooting takes place, I happen to be in the resource teacher’s office, which is next to the resource classroom. I hear pupils entering the resource classroom and asking each other what this place is. Then I hear one teacher answering: ‘This place is for children who have problems with their brains’. The pupils know that Lian comes here. I thus remind Ms Guan (a resource teacher) who sits next to me that the teacher’s words may have negative impacts on the LRC pupils in the school. Ms Guan immediately walks outside to talk to the teacher but I cannot hear clearly of the conversation.

(Several days later)

Ms Guan tells me about the reaction of that teacher. I learn that when Ms Guan went to intervene, she said to the teacher: ‘What are you talking about? The doctor is inside. She heard you!’ The teacher was embarrassed for making the school ‘lose face’. The teacher later complained to Ms Guan: ‘Why is she so serious about what she is doing? Why does the country spend so much money on this? A doctor in special education? Totally a waste of resources! If you are looking for humanity, you should go to the West.’

(Fieldnotes, 06/12/2013 & 20/12/2013)

It was certainly not pleasant to hear the above comments from a teacher, which was part of the inevitable emotional challenge of doing fieldwork (Punch, 2012).

However, I could sense that research about disabled children's inclusion might still be seen as imposing Western ideology in order to judge the practices of local teachers and schools, though it was not the intention of this research.

In all, my researcher identity was often conceptualised, defined and assigned by people in the schools (Ergun & Erdemir, 2010; Giampapa, 2011), which raised issues of access, field relations and ethical dilemmas. However, I argue that researchers should not remain passive during the research process. I kept negotiating my presence and the research agenda through active management of the way people might perceive me, to co-construct what I could possibly learn from the field.

#### 4.3.4 Research ethics

This research has involved disabled children, who could be quite vulnerable to harm and exploitation. However, the silence of disabled children's voices is often justified by adults for the purpose of protection. Thus, being aware of the tension between protection and participation of children, I saw the principle of research ethics as two-fold: First, the possibilities of causing negative physical, psychological or social harm to participants, especially disabled children, should be minimised because of my duty of care (Masson, 2000). Second, I should also actively negotiate the space to maximise children's participation in the research process.

The ethical guideline for educational research developed by the British Educational Research Association was used to provide the main codes of practice (BERA, 2011), and the research was conducted under the approval of the ethical committee of Moray House School of Education in the University of Edinburgh<sup>25</sup>. Apart from general ethical principles, I stress that every researcher faces various ethical issues that are situated in specific research contexts. The six ethical dimensions of research which were proposed by Macfarlane (2009) are illuminating – courage,

respectfulness, resoluteness, sincerity, humility and reflexivity. Careful, detailed and in-depth ethical considerations have permeated all stages of the research process. In this section, I will discuss how the major ethical issues were addressed and how I made ethical decisions during the fieldwork.

#### 4.3.4.1 Informed consent

Historically, people with learning difficulties have been viewed as unable to make decisions for themselves (Nind, 2008). Seeing disabled children as their own gatekeepers, it is essential to gain direct consent from them rather than passive assent (ESRC, 2015). However, because adults tend to perform as the ‘knowers’ of children’s willingness and abilities to participate and of what suits children’s best interests, there exists in education a tacit assumption that children’s participation in research should be determined by LEAs, schools or parents (Lewis & Porter, 2007). Thus, in this research, it was also inevitable that I had to go through layers of access to reach out to disabled children (Lewis, 2005): consent was needed from schools’ headteachers for my visits, individual teachers for observing their classrooms and conducting interviews with them, parents in respect of parental responsibilities (Masson, 2000), and finally children themselves.

I prepared five tailored versions of informed consent letters for headteachers, teachers, parents of disabled children, other parents from the participating classes, and disabled children, respectively (see Appendix-D). The consent letters explained the purpose and benefits of the research, what was expected from participants, the principles of confidentiality and anonymity, and participants’ rights to participate or withdraw at any point (Lindsay, 2000). The child-friendly letters for disabled children included key information with simple language and pictures (Gallagher, 2009a).

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<sup>25</sup> Several changes were made to the original research plan based on the feedback from the committee. For example, photos including human figures would not be published, though we have seen more and more research presenting photos of social interactions (e.g. Shohel, 2012; Stockall, 2013), and the ‘diary’ method was removed because disabled children were considered incompetent to complete such a task without becoming distressed. The comments did reflect a strong orientation towards protection.

Nevertheless, one special issue was that, given sensitivity to the disability stigma in China, disabled children in the participating schools were not informed about the LRC/disability labels attached to them. Thus I was obliged to be discreet about such information in front of disabled children themselves and other children and families, as required by schools and disabled children's parents. In the consent letters for disabled children and parents of other pupils, I introduced the research as a general educational study without mentioning that it had its focus on disabled children. Other children's parents only needed to dissent if they did not want their children to be shown in photos that were used as interview prompts for research purposes.

Figure 4.4 shows the linear process of gaining consent. In section 4.3.3, I have mentioned that the procedure of gaining consent was re-negotiated given the cultural interpretation of 'leaving the signature' on consent letters. In each school, after the headteacher gave consent, consent letters would be handed to class teachers and resource teachers who had previously been informed about the research by oral communication. When a class teacher agreed to participate, consent letters would be sent to parents of potential child participants after the teachers had called the parents. Other parents received information about the research through the schools' platform for online communication with families. After disabled children's parents agreed to their children's participation, I arranged a meeting with each child. Although some teachers raised questions about children's ability to give consent, at my insistence I was still allowed to talk with children.

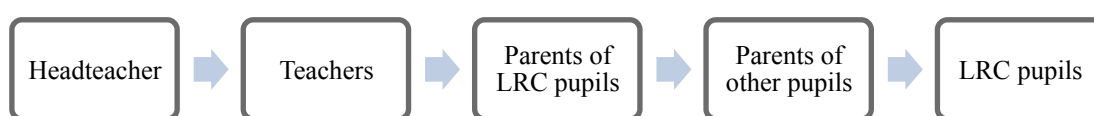


Figure 4.4 The linear process of gaining informed consent

The sessions with children were informal and relaxing, which served the purpose of 'ice-breaking' between children and myself (Alderson, 2005), so as to build rapport and balance potential power relations. I considered it rather important to gain consent from disabled children in person, because this gave me the chance to reassure them that this research was not any form of schoolwork and was not related to

rewards/punishments (Curtis, Roberts, Copperman, Downie & Liabo, 2004); thus I could demonstrate to children that my role was indeed different from that of a teacher. I could also help them to better understand what would happen if they did participate, and enable them to bring up any questions they had about the research. In other words, I intended to engage children through interactions rather than by leaving the information with them, as if decision-making solely depended on an individual's cognitive processing (Harris, 2003). Children were also invited to try out the camera (my mobile phone) and a digital voice recorder that would be used during interviews. When a child refused to participate, I did not try to persuade him/her, but avoided making the child feel obliged to take part. Furthermore, I paid attention to children's non-verbal clues in case they showed resistance (Alderson, Morrow & Barnardo's, 2004).

Children had few difficulties in understanding what would happen during the research or their right to stop participating at any time. Some children perceived the research as similar to TV shows where they would be interviewed like celebrities. Most children were very happy to hear their own voices and pleased to be recorded, except for one girl who felt that her voice did not sound beautiful enough. I reassured her that it was only me who would be listening to the recordings. With adults, the main difficulties in gaining consent included teachers' busy schedules which afforded little time to engage with the research, and parents' worries about confidentiality.

It should be stressed that gaining consent does not consist of a one-off session but is an ongoing process (Knox et al., 2000; Lee, 1993; Lewis & Porter, 2004; Porter, 2009). During the fieldwork, I continued to negotiate access and remind participants of their rights. For example, at the beginning of every interview or other research activity, I checked with participants about their willingness to proceed. When necessary, I also explained the research methods and process to participants.

#### **4.3.4.2 Confidentiality and anonymity**

Participants' identities needed to be strictly protected in this research. First, as stated previously, I had the responsibility to avoid concealing children's disability



conditions to minimise the risk of stigma and discrimination. Second, teachers did not want to be identified, for fear of unwanted consequences of what I was allowed to observe and learn from them.

Pseudonyms have been used to replace all participants' names. All the transcripts, recordings and photos are kept in my personal laptop, which requires a password only known to myself. These materials will be destroyed five years after completing the research. No photos including human figures will be made public in any publication or report. Nevertheless, I need to acknowledge that these strategies could not completely eliminate the possibility of participants being identified by people who were familiar with them, a fact which has been emphasised in consent letters.

In addition, there is a limit to confidentiality in regard to the issue of child abuse, because researchers may have to disclose information if people are being harmed (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). Because no satisfactory system for safeguarding children exists in China, I was cautious and sensitive when handling this issue. If I had encountered it, I would have sought help from the supervisors and the ethics committee first (Gallagher, 2009a). It would also have been necessary to consult children who were being abused before taking any action. I included such information in the consent letters to participants, and in particular explained to children what this meant. Only one child asked what would happen if she was the one who was being hurt; I replied that she would be protected in the same way as other children. Throughout the fieldwork, I was not aware of any incident of abuse.

#### **4.3.4.3 Ethics in the field**

The abstract principles of research ethics tend to give the impression that grappling with ethical issues is straightforward. Although the guidelines and suggestions from institutions, ethics committees and experienced researchers (e.g. Lewis & Porter, 2004) could help researchers to foresee and prepare for possible situations in the field, there could still be countless unexpected developments which would require researchers to be critical and reflexive in making immediate ethical decisions. It has been very helpful to draw on the notion of 'ethical radar' (Skånfors, 2009) to guide

my actions during the fieldwork, so that I could be highly alert to ethical problems in my daily interactions with children and teachers.

First, I made sure that children's rights to participation, privacy and wellbeing were respected and protected. For instance, when children gathered in small groups and tried to keep their distance from me, I did not move closer to them to try to overhear their conversations. I avoided pressuring or convincing them to share their views with me when I noticed that their body language showed reluctance, hesitation or resistance. I also constantly checked children's willingness to continue participating in this research<sup>26</sup>. When children talked about negative experiences, I listened to them with acceptance and sympathy and carefully observed their reactions to make sure that they were not distressed.

Second, being in the field grounded me within the networks and existing power relations among school members. Because I was not in a position to interfere with schools' practice, sometimes compromises were made which reaffirmed the relational sense of ethics (Horton, 2005). For example, I was unable to step in when children were criticised by teachers. The dilemmatic situation especially applied to the issue of bullying. The effort to differentiate myself from teachers made it hard for me to manage pupils' discipline when bullying took place (Christensen, 2004; see Illustration 13 in section 6.5.1 for an example). It could be problematic to report to teachers pupils who had bullied disabled children, knowing that they might be punished. In the end, I decided to talk with disabled children and their teachers to find out how they understood bullying and their reactions to such incidents.

Third, another important ethical issue for this research was how to control the potential effects of negative labelling. This research may benefit disabled children by hearing their marginalised voices; however, carrying out the project in schools required me to be extra careful about the research arrangements. Thus, research activities were conducted during breaks when children's absence from the

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<sup>26</sup> There was a boy who initially agreed to participate but later became reluctant to talk with me. I learned that he wanted nothing to do with the resource classroom anymore because he had heard other children saying that only bad pupils went there. I asked him if he actually did not want to participate anymore and made it clear that it was absolutely fine to withdraw. Even if the teachers felt that they should talk to him to change his mind, I insisted that his decision should be fully respected.

classrooms would hardly be noticed. The child participants were also consulted over where and when they preferred to see me. When I was conducting observation in regular classrooms, I treated the child participants no differently from other children: I kept looking around rather than fixing my attention on them in particular, and I would not approach them when other children were present. During interviews, I was also cautious about asking probing questions regarding any different treatment they experienced, but would only extend the discussion if children themselves raised this issue.

Despite my efforts to minimise the risk of marking out the child participants, I could do nothing about it when teachers were less sensitive about this issue. For instance, some teachers seemed to have increased the frequency of their interactions with disabled children during lessons. It was not hard to detect such 'new' practice because other pupils would show their surprise. Indeed, it was very difficult for teachers themselves to manage the labelling effects of their everyday practice. At least, the conduct of the research did not add to the difficulties or worsen the circumstances of disabled children's school lives.

Altogether, ethical practices in the field often had to be negotiated, and I made flexible adjustments accordingly in specific situations. Although there were risks that could not be eradicated, through careful ethical consideration I reckoned that the benefits of making these children's voices heard outweighed the potential associated risks (Snelgrove, 2005). I was able to make sure that children and teachers enjoyed their participation in this research, and what they shared with me was beyond my expectations.

#### **4.3.5 Trustworthiness**

The notion of trustworthiness proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) was adopted to evaluate the quality control of the research, addressing issues of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, by employing strategies of triangulation and reflexivity.

There has been much debate about the meaning of triangulation and how it should be used in a research. The metaphor was borrowed from military navigation, which

involved using multiple references to determine the location of an object (Mathison, 1988). The notion is often used to imply the use of multiple methods, different sources of data or various perspectives. Its early application has been widely questioned for its assumptions that any single perspective on the researched phenomenon could be validated, and that the involvement of multiple points of information would automatically guarantee the quality of the research (Krefting, 1991; Mathison, 1988). Instead, I use the triangulation strategy as a way to enrich and enhance my understanding of the complex processes involved in disabled children's inclusion and exclusion in regular schools. Rather than seeking convergence, contradictions and inconsistencies in the data should be treated as equally important, since interrogating the similarity of or difference between views, and the determinant situations respectively, could help me to arrive at a more plausible interpretation (Mathison, 1988).

Triangulation of methods and data sources (Axinn & Pearce, 2006; Denzin, 1978; Flick, 2007) was applied. The multiple methods of data collection have complemented each other, which strengthened my confidence in the representation. For example, the use of participant observation effectively enhanced participants' authenticity during interviews. It also enabled me to gain more information about disabled children's experiences, because they might encounter difficulties in expressing themselves during interviews. Also, by including the views of children and teachers, I was able to examine what had been shared and what was perceived as different from each side. Observation of children's actions was conducted across a range of times and places, enabling me to observe how the same child could act rather differently in different classrooms. I constantly reflected on, questioned and verified my interpretation while collecting and analysing data to ensure rigorosity (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers, 2002).

At the start, I considered using the technique of member-checks – inviting participants to comment on the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation. However, I was unable to carry out this plan because teachers were reluctant to commit more of their time to the project and the pupils could not easily be reached again. It should also be noted that even if member-checks had been conducted, the question would

remain as to whether such a strategy could guarantee a trustworthy conclusion. As pointed out by Sandelowski (2002), member-checks might produce a different interpretation of participants' reactions, compared with my understanding of their previous responses.

This research might generate two types of generalisation. One is what Schofield (2000) noted as a generalisation of future prospects: what I found out from the participating schools might happen in other schools at a later stage because Shanghai's schools were positioned as examples for other areas to learn from. For instance, in the recent policy document 'Improvement Plan of Special Education (2014-2016)' (MoE, Committee of Development and Reform, MoCA, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Personnel, Ministry of Labor, Ministry of Health & CDPF, 2014), it was recommended that more schools nationwide should open resource classrooms like those Shanghai had been piloting. Thus it might be assumed that more disabled children would have experiences of such provision similar to the experiences of the child participants in this research. Furthermore, naturalistic generalisation may be gained from the descriptive accounts, which enable readers to form their own interpretations through their particular theoretical lenses (Stake, 1995, 2000).

The other crucial strategy for addressing trustworthiness in this research was reflexivity, which was illustrated in the examination of my own role in the research and the way I made decisions. I was very much aware of how my own identity, experiences, perspectives or stances influenced my actions and interpretations (Krefting, 1991; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; see section 4.3.3). To fully accept children in the first place, I drew on my own 'humanity' (Thomas & Glenny, 2005) and 'immaturity' (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008) to explore the connections with children, such as our shared aspirations to participate and to belong. The monologue of my subjectivity was documented and presented.

#### 4.4 Summary

This chapter presented the main methodological framework and the research design. The research was underpinned by the epistemological stance of social and

transformative constructivism. Careful consideration was given to realising the aim of doing research *with* children rather than *on* them, a principle which greatly influenced how I engaged and interacted with disabled children throughout the research process. The research was designed to be qualitative and exploratory, thus involving both deductive and inductive processes. The *Framework for Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) was used as a research tool at different stages to facilitate the collection of data in schools and the analysis and presentation of the research findings, a tool which I found applicable to Chinese schooling contexts because of its openness and flexibility. I explained why the ethnographic approach was considered the most suitable one for this inquiry, enabling me to collect data about disabled children's and their teachers' everyday school lives reflexively and ethically, and in accordance with which I examined the impacts of my researcher identity on the research process. Ethical considerations have influenced many critical research decisions. Besides illustrating how informed consent was gained and how issues of confidentiality and anonymity were addressed, I also noted some of the dilemmatic ethical situations that arose during the fieldwork. To conclude the research design, I discussed how the trustworthiness of the research was ensured by strategies of triangulation and reflexivity.



## Chapter 5 Methods

### 5.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, I discussed methodological considerations and introduced the overall research design. This chapter continues with further illustration of the methods used for data collection and analysis. I will first describe the sampling for the research and provide basic information about the participants. In section 5.3, I introduce the methods that I used during the fieldwork to collect information about disabled children's learning and participation in regular schools, including participant observation, participatory activities with children, and interviews with teachers. I give the justification for choosing these methods, describe how I used them and consider whether I gained quality data. Section 5.4 focuses on the approach to analysing the data, discussing the process from preliminary analysis during data collection, through data organisation, to the systematic analysis of the whole data set.

### 5.2 Sampling

I first made contact with colleagues in the East China Normal University through my personal networks. The Department of Early Education and Special Education has already established collaborative relationships with SEGCs in Shanghai. After sending out requests, one jurisdiction agreed to participate<sup>27</sup>. I met with the director, Mr Liang of the SEGC, who was very enthusiastic and ambitious to strengthen the implementation of LRC. He was experimenting with several initiatives in the jurisdiction, including the plan to open one resource classroom in every regular school. From him I learned that the designation of SEN/LRC pupils was being

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<sup>27</sup> The district is undergoing a rapid process of economic restructuring and urbanisation. Its residential population is over 1.6 million, half of whom are migrants. The enrolment rate for compulsory education has been kept at 100% consistently over years, including children from migrant families. In 2013, over 2/3 of the compulsory schools in this jurisdiction had LRC pupils on the roll. There was only one special school for the whole district. Because of its limited places, only children whose IQ test results were below 50 could be admitted; otherwise regular schools had no grounds to deny their access.



deliberately limited because of the insufficiency of funding<sup>28</sup>; most regular schools had fewer than 10 LRC pupils on the roll. Even if regular schools could submit applications to designate LRC pupils, there were additional criteria for eligibility. For example, children from migrant families were not eligible<sup>29</sup>. Children with specific learning disabilities (such as dyslexia), emotional and behavioural difficulties, ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) or chronic illnesses were not included<sup>30</sup>. The SEGC also tended to avoid designating children at early primary level, to lower the risk of mislabelling unless a child's impairments were substantially severe.

Originally I planned to recruit disabled children with a range of impairments, but after learning more about the situation in this specific jurisdiction, I decided to narrow down the participants to children who were identified as having Learning Difficulties (which in China is determined by IQ measured according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV [DSM]'s diagnostic criteria of Mental Retardation). Because LRC pupils' academic results would be excluded from schools' league tables, children with learning difficulties were at risk of being overrepresented among LRC pupils. Labelling these children out was seen as 'beneficial' for schools. Ironically, children with physical or sensory impairments might not be seen as having the relevant 'needs', as long as they were able to keep up with the standard curriculum.

Due to the prevailing stigma on disability in Chinese society and the request for commitment from schools to accommodate this ethnographic research, it was difficult to gain consent from all stakeholders. Thus, the recruitment of participants

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<sup>28</sup> Once a child is designated as an LRC pupil, s/he would become entitled to additional provision and services. These include financial benefits such as free school lunch and a certain amount of funds for medical/psychological treatment, additional learning supports from resource teachers, chances to participate in extracurricular activities exclusively provided for SEN pupils, and straight admission to junior secondary regular schools in the catchment area. The 'guarantee' of the transition is important in Shanghai because of the competition over choice of school after primary school.

<sup>29</sup> The funding to support SEN/LRC pupils is allocated through Shanghai's local financial resources, and the mechanism of transferring funds from other jurisdictions has not been established. Children from migrant families who do not hold Shanghai *Hukou* are thus not allowed to register with the city's special educational system.

<sup>30</sup> These categories were excluded by CDPF because they were seen as more 'educational' than 'medical' – raising more issues about the 'accuracy' of the diagnosis.

followed convenience sampling; that is, I tried to include any participant who was willing to participate, to maximise my opportunities to learn from them (Stake, 2006).

I liaised with schools which had a larger number of LRC pupils with learning difficulties on the roll. Four schools from the jurisdiction agreed to participate. They are given the pseudonyms Mingzhu, Yulan, Wenyan and Hongxing. They are state-funded primary schools, and have opened resource classrooms for LRC pupils (see Appendix-E for the introduction to each school). When recruiting children from these schools, I did not add any criteria about their abilities, to enhance the inclusivity of the research (Morris, 2003).

I recruited 11 children as research participants: 8 girls and 3 boys; 7 child participants were categorised as having Mild Learning Difficulties (IQ 50-70), 3 as having Moderate Learning Difficulties (IQ 35-49) and 1 as having Severe Learning Difficulties (IQ 20-34). The age range was 9-12 years old and they were studying in primary years 2-5. All were capable of verbal communication in their everyday lives. The overview of child participants is shown in table 5.1 (see Appendix-F for more description of each child).

Table 5.1 Basic information about the child participants

Name	School	Class teacher	Age	Gender	Category
Sha	Mingzhu	Ms Ding	10	Female	Mild LD
Qi	Mingzhu	Ms Xia	10	Male	Moderate LD
Ting	Yulan	Ms Cui	9	Female	Moderate LD
Li	Yulan	Ms Ruan	9	Female	Mild LD
Xin	Yulan	Ms Jia	11	Female	Mild LD
Dan	Wenyan	Ms Shen	11	Female	Mild LD
Lulu	Wenyan	Ms Shen	12	Female	Mild LD
Ning	Hongxing	Ms Ai	11	Female	Mild LD
Wu	Hongxing	Ms Qian	10	Male	Moderate LD
Rui	Hongxing	Ms Dai	9	Male	Mild LD
Lian	Hongxing	Ms Jun	10	Female	Severe LD

The child participants' class teachers were recruited as well as the resource teachers. They were familiar with the child participants and played critical roles in decision-making about the educational provision for them. All were female. The basic

information about teacher participants is included in table 5.2 (see Appendix-F for more description of each teacher).

**Table 5.2 Basic information about the teacher participants**

Name	School	Years of teaching	Class/Resource	SEN/LRC Training
Ms Ding	Mingzhu	26	Class teacher	None
Ms Xia	Mingzhu	6	Class teacher	Special education research
Ms Zhang	Mingzhu	23	Resource teacher	Resource teacher
Ms Cui	Yulan	14	Class teacher	None
Ms Ruan	Yulan	18	Class teacher	None
Ms Jia	Yulan	17	Class teacher	None
Ms Zhao	Yulan	20	Resource teacher	None
Ms Shen	Wenyuan	22	Class teacher	None
Ms Ai	Hongxing	20	Class teacher	None
Ms Qian	Hongxing	1.5	Class teacher	None
Ms Dai	Hongxing	5	Class teacher	None
Ms Jun	Hongxing	15	Class teacher	None
Ms Guan	Hongxing	28	Resource teacher	Resource teacher

## 5.3 Fieldwork

The formal study was carried out in the Fall Semester 2013-2014. Given the exploratory nature of the research, the principles of openness and flexibility were reflected in the overall research process (Begley, 2000; Curtain & Clarke, 2005), as I needed to make adjustments according to experiences unfolding in the field. In choosing research methods, I agree that the most fundamental principle is to consider the extent to which the data collected through the methods could serve the purpose of answering the research questions.

### 5.3.1 Participant observation

Participant observation is central to ethnographic research. By this method, I managed to stay close to participants' everyday encounters and gained important insights into the constructed meanings through their interactions. The use of participant observation has been one of the strengths of this inquiry, providing several benefits.

Observation complemented the limitations of the interview method (Lewis, 2004). Participants may try to regulate stories and practice during interviews (Delamont, 2002; Silverman, 2013). Sandelowski (2002) warned against a naive view of treating interview data as authentically true by virtue of 'giving voices'. Foster (1996) suggested that it was important to observe school life without being influenced by teachers' accounts. In this way, observation offered data about what participants were doing beyond what they said about it, which could help ensure the quality of representation through triangulation. Also, since the child participants in this research could experience difficulties in articulating their feelings and thoughts through interviews, it would have been problematic to rely solely on interview data to represent their perspectives and experiences. Observation could help to greatly expand the depth and breadth of children's data (Darbyshire et al., 2005). Additionally, the data gained from this method could enable me to continue to reflect on what additional knowledge needed to be sought during the fieldwork.

The observation started from the beginning of the fieldwork, so that I could better individualise interviews, based on what I had learned; also, the experience of immersing myself in school life could make it easier for participants to be open and honest with me<sup>31</sup>. My role was mainly that of an 'observer-as-participant' (Gold, 1958) because I certainly did not become one of the school members. However, with additional visits and chats with teachers and children, I was also further involved in social interactions; I would be asked to help when needed and some people treated me more like a friend. I recognised that it was important to document and examine my interactions with people in the field.

My observation followed a continuous and comparatively unstructured style (Gillham, 2008; Tilstone, 1998a), with a focus on the participants' interactions with other school members, including teaching and learning in classrooms, and disabled children's social interactions with other children and teachers. I organised a schedule of classroom observation to ensure that I observed all subjects that a child was

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<sup>31</sup> One teacher participant, Ms Guan, also noted that surveys or interviews were not enough to reveal the complicated situations faced by teachers in schools.

leaning during the semester<sup>32</sup>. During lessons, I sat at the back of the classroom without interrupting teachers' teaching practice, though this did not ensure that teachers or pupils would not behave differently as a result of my presence. Outside the classrooms, I moved around the campus and talked with children and staff informally.

I recorded the observational data by taking fieldnotes, a process which was less intrusive than other methods and could be easily accepted by participants. The notes were taken in an unstructured way, by writing down as much as possible of what I had observed. I tried to describe events exactly as they happened (Clark & Leat, 1998; Tilstone, 1998b), addressing the nine dimensions of social situations proposed by Spradley (1980): space, actor, activity, object, act, event, time, goal and feeling. Meanwhile, I also had the *Framework for Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) on my mind to quickly examine relevant issues surrounding disabled children's learning and participation. I was aware that what I observed was shaped by the research focus, and by my assumptions (Foster, 1996) and tacit knowledge (Wolfinger, 2002). I also incorporated myself in the notes, recording data such as my own actions, sensory feelings (Murchison, 2010) or emotional responses.

Writing detailed notes on classroom observation was straightforward, but in other situations, I had to find opportunities to jot down notes as soon as possible before my memory became blurred (Bernard, 2006). All participating schools provided me with desk space so that I could work on my notes. On a daily basis, I transcribed the notes in electronic form and filled in more details. In addition, I kept a diary to record more personal experiences (Bernard, 2006; Punch, 2012).

I also took photos to prepare prompts for interviews with children. For ethical reasons, I only took a limited number of photos reflecting ordinary scenes, to avoid drawing attention to any specific child or disturbing the ongoing activities. Indeed, there were many situations in which it was not appropriate to take out my camera, such as when a child was being told off and caused distress by a teacher. These ordinary images were used to remind disabled children about lessons, activities and

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<sup>32</sup> It was common for schools to 'skip' non-core subjects, and teachers often re-scheduled lessons because of other interruptions.

people in the school, and in this way to help them recall what they were doing and how they were feeling.

### 5.3.2 Participatory activities with children

Inspired by the Mosaic approach, which underlined the need to make a variety of methods available and thus make research socially and culturally inclusive of more children (Clark, 2014; Clark & Moss, 2001, 2011), I also adopted a range of participatory activities to gain children's views. As discussed in section 4.2.2, such methods could effectively enable me to elicit children's views through balanced power relations.

#### *Guided tours*

The first activity that I conducted with children was guided tours, which combined child-led tours (Clark & Moss, 2001; Stalker, 1998) and photography (Barker & Weller, 2003; Booth & Booth, 2003). Each child participant was invited to take me on a photography tour around the campus to show me the places they liked or disliked. Children usually led the way, walking ahead of me, and introduced me to places and people, acting as the knowers and the gatekeepers to their worlds.

When we stopped at a place, I asked children more follow-up questions, such as: Why do you dis/like this place? What do you usually do here? Who would come here with you? What can be done to make things better? I used an audio-recorder to record the conversations with children. When we were about to take photos, I asked children if they were happy to handle the camera. Some children took the photos by themselves. My reaction to the photos was always positive, to prevent children worrying about their photography skills (Baker & Weller, 2003). If children were reluctant to take the photos by themselves, I would crouch down to be at the same height with them and we would take the photos together. I showed the screen to the children and checked whether they were satisfied with the quality. I would print the photos out if children wanted to bring them home (usually they asked for the photos of the places they liked).

The guided tours activity was productive, and rapport with children was quickly developed. Most children started talking about their school lives right away when we set off. It felt natural for us to chat informally when we were walking alongside each other, as if we were hanging out like friends. From children's reactions, the activity seemed to be interesting, relaxing and enjoyable for them. Some children felt that there was not enough time to show me more of their school, even if we had already spent 30 minutes together.

### *Photo-elicitation interviews*

At a later stage when children became more familiar with me, I conducted photo-elicited interviews with them. The setting of the interview could allow me to ask more deliberate questions within the research focus, and children would be expected to give descriptions and justifications of their experiences and views (Denscombe, 1983; Harrison, MacGibbon & Morton, 2001). I chose to interview them individually so that their privacy could be better protected and they would not need to face potential marginalisation in groups. Meanwhile, I could be more responsive and sensitive to their individual feelings and needs. In terms of choosing suitable places to carry out the interviews, children should feel familiar with and safe in the places, which should not be associated with past negative experiences (Gallagher, 2009b, 2009c). Thus the child participants were consulted about their opinions. As a result, children were interviewed in resource classrooms or other functional classrooms. To avoid making children feel tired or bored, every interview slot was set to last about 20-30 minutes. Subject to the availability of free periods for children, the whole interview for a child might take 2 or 3 sessions, on different days, to complete.

Before starting each interview, I checked whether the child would like to participate. I reminded children that they could drop out anytime they wanted to and that they did not have to answer my questions. They could feel free to ask for a break during interviews. I also reassured each child that no other people would know that it was him/her being interviewed. I formulated a guideline (see Appendix-G), which was not strictly followed, to leave enough space for unanticipated responses and perspectives (King & Horrocks, 2010; Yin, 2009). The style of an interview was more like that of a chat with children about their schooling, and some questions were

individualised to elicit children's comments on certain events or situations that I had observed. All the interviews were recorded subject to the children's consent.

The photos I took during observation were used as interview prompts (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). Children were familiar with the everyday situations captured by the photos so they could identify personal meanings in such material. This countered the main disadvantage of interviews that only relied on children's verbal competency (Booth & Booth, 2003; Cappello, 2005; Gibson, 2012; Nind, 2008). Photos could also facilitate communication and stimulate children's reflections (Miles & Kaplan, 2005; O'Brien, 2013). Furthermore, they could help children to recall more details about events and related feelings.

Drawing on the technique of 'good/bad things about school' (Porter et al., 2008), I asked children to allocate the photos into three categories of 'good', 'bad' and 'not sure'. After they sorted the photos into three piles, I asked them to rank the photos in each set based on their preferences (Figure 5.1). Children spent much time juggling the photos about while deciding how to arrange them. They thought aloud about the comparisons between photos and the rationales for their decisions. After they were satisfied with the results, I asked them more follow-up questions such as: Why did you put this photo here? What's so good about it? What makes you dislike this one? Afterwards, I took photos of the final arrangements. Children's behaviour, in matters such as attentiveness or distraction during interviews, was also documented in fieldnotes.

All child participants easily understood the idea of the activity and they were capable of participating with few difficulties. Their arrangements turned out to be highly consistent with my own observation of their experiences. The photos indeed facilitated children's recall of lessons, activities, events and interactions. They offered more information about the photos, which I would not have gleaned by observation alone. There were some unexpected decisions about the photo arrangements, and the reasons offered by children could be rather interesting. For example, one girl, Sha, put the photos of natural science lessons (which were inclusive and successful as shown in illustration 2, section 6.3.1) in the category of 'bad' because she felt that she did not look nice in the photos; they failed to fit her



sense of self (Stockall, 2013). So I attributed the fault to my poor photography skills and asked her where she would put the pictures if they had been of better quality. Then she said that she would happily move them to the top of the ‘good’ category.



Figure 5.1 Photo-elicitation interviews with children

There were some challenges during the interviews. For instance, children could feel easily distracted, and then it could be hard to keep a conversation flowing without interruptions. Children might also stick to what they wanted to say, even though it seemed irrelevant to my research focus. In such circumstances, I often tried to let children finish their comments no matter how irrelevant they seemed, to prevent children from feeling obliged to adhere to my interests.

### *Seed in a pot*

Before finishing the interviews with children, I introduced an activity called ‘seed in a pot’. This activity was culturally adapted from ‘message in the bottle’ (Messiou, 2012) or ‘magic wand’ (Epstein, Stevens, McKeever & Baruchel, 2006), to which it has a similar form. I invited children to share their wishes about what changes they desired to see in schools, these dreams constituting the ‘seeds’ that someday might come true. Although most children would have already mentioned some of their aspirations for change, this activity served well in avoiding omission and acted as a

positive way to finish an interview. At the end of the interviews, children could bring up any issues that had not been covered.

### *Symbol signs*

During activities, I used symbol signs to facilitate children's expression of needs, feelings and wishes. This has been recognised as an effective strategy (Porter, 2014; Porter et al., 2001). Four signs were handed to children – 'happy face', 'sad face', 'question mark' and 'red stop' (Figure 5.2). Children could use the signs with facial expressions to show their feelings. They could use the 'question mark' sign when they wanted to ask questions or make requests, so our interactions would not reflect a scenario in which I was the only one with the power to question children. By holding up the 'red stop' sign, children could easily and comfortably indicate their unwillingness to continue<sup>33</sup>. It was fine if children did not use the signs at all because I did not want to impose any assumptions about their competence.



Figure 5.2 Symbol signs

### 5.3.3 Interviews with teachers

In Chinese culture, people tend to avoid confronting each other even if they have differing ideas. Thus teachers were interviewed individually so that they could feel more comfortable about sharing their opinions. Because teachers were extremely busy, I asked them to choose a suitable time and place. Teachers were very cooperative; most of them blocked two periods, which might require them to exchange lessons with other teachers or catch up with marking or lesson planning in their free time.

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<sup>33</sup> This sign was sometimes used by children to mean that something was not good.

Because teachers are constantly exposed to inspections and external judgements about their practices, they could feel vulnerable about being interviewed. For instance, one class teacher, Ms Ding, brought a few pages of notes to the interview because she wanted to ensure that she could demonstrate her knowledge and expertise. Herd (2010) noted that it was necessary to show an accepting and non-judgemental attitude when interviewing teachers. Therefore, at the beginning of each interview, besides reminding teachers of their right to stop participating at any time and of the protection of their identities, I also explained that I was conducting this research out of my own interest in hearing what they had to say about the inclusion of disabled children. I reassured them that I was not performing any kind of inspection for the LEA, and showed my sympathy with their difficulties and circumstances. During the interviews, teachers seemed to be open and honest with me. They shared many personal stories and tended to be reflective about their experiences. This made me feel that teachers desired to be heard, given that in reality few such opportunities were provided.

All the interviews were audio-recorded except one, because the teacher in question felt that she did not want to 'leave evidence' of her comments about other staff. I agreed because I wanted to learn about her perspective. She kindly waited for me to complete writing notes during the interview, and I was confident that I had accurately documented her words. The interviews were semi-structured, following an interview guideline (see Appendix-G). Specific issues that were relevant to individual children were added in the interviews, based on results from my observation and children's interviews. For example, I asked the class teacher Ms Jun why she called the child participant Lian by a different name and what that meant for her. I did not deliberately limit the time for an interview. Nevertheless, the interviews often lasted much longer than I expected, from 40 minutes to 1.5 hours. Some teachers, like Ms Zhang and Ms Shen, even extended the conversations for another hour after the interviews. I noted down these dialogues in my fieldnotes.

Overall, teachers did not make many negative comments about children; their resentment of implementing LRC seemed to have more to do with being constantly inspected. The interviews with teachers provided valuable insights into the dynamic

processes of disabled children's inclusion and exclusion in regular schools, revealing matters such as class teachers' uncertainty about what they could do in regular classrooms, their struggle with the agenda of pupils' academic performances, which directly impacted on their payments, or the adherence by some of them to their belief in including every child in their classrooms. Together with children's views, I was able to move towards a better understanding of the schooling process.

## 5.4 Analysing data

After fieldwork, I left Shanghai with an overwhelmingly large amount of material. There were 84 days of fieldnotes, 39 short recordings of guided tours with children, 25 slots of interview recordings with children, 13 interview recordings with teachers (one was written in the form of notes), and 19 diary entries. The collected data were rich, in-depth and interesting; however, they were also messy and complex. How to move beyond a superficial understanding of participants' perspectives? How to approach a plausible representation? The quality and rigorousness of data analysis matter much in bridging data and interpretation.

### 5.4.1 Data analysis as a social practice

Data analysis should be understood as a social practice because it was me attempting to make sense of participants' meanings. As noted by Hitchcock (1983), research data and findings are 'constituted by the interpretive work which went into producing them' (p. 22). It was inevitable that I would be selective in terms of what was important, pertinent or compelling, what concepts or theories were relevant, and above all, what 'story' I was going to tell. I would not claim that the representation gained from this research was the only true image of what was going on in schools; this was one of the pitfalls of positivism (Silverman, 2011). Instead, recognising my role in data co-construction, and being reflexive and transparent about my subjectivity, could enhance the trustworthiness of the research.

#### *Coherence with the epistemological lens*

Byrne (2004) noted that based on different epistemological assumptions, data could be seen either as a resource providing the 'facts', or more as a topic that illuminated

one possible version of the social world. Trondman (2008) used the metaphor that theory was like the blood and ethnography was the heart, to describe the relation in-between. He argued that both theoretical and empirical aspects deserved their place in the production of a truthful account. Although some researchers believe that a research's epistemological framework plays a much less significant role in data analysis (e.g. Miles et al., 2014), I am more in agreement with Silverman (2011) that the means of making sense of the data should be as coherent as possible with one's epistemological stance. Rather than seeing the contradictions, complexities or confusions in data as problems, I avoided taking self-evident information as granted but actively sought alternative understandings of participants' meanings. For the same segment of data, there could be various possible interpretations.

It could be confusing to see inconsistencies between teachers' accounts and their everyday practice. I am not only referring to the tendency for teachers to justify exclusionary practices. Sometimes, teachers might not be articulating any inclusive beliefs even if they were implementing them in the classroom. For instance, teachers might use 'discriminatory' language to describe disabled children, while in classroom teaching, exclusionary practices seemed to be absent. This might reflect the absence of any other language available in the schools. Such insights would not be gained if I took teachers' accounts at face value. Similarly, when a child participant, Li, could not show me any more places except her classroom, rather than believing that she indeed had no preferences or did not like the method, her response seemed rather to reflect her marginalised position: without friends, she might have very few chances to explore places in the school.

Furthermore, conducting the research in my home country, I had the advantage of recognising more culturally distinct phenomena such as children's conforming to parents' expectations as a means of demonstrating filial piety. At the same time, I was aware that I might risk overlooking the significance of some phenomena during analysis.

### *Understanding and interpreting what children said*

The data from the interviews with children, at first glance, did not appear to be ‘quality’ enough, which made me wonder whether I had actually collected any data, a doubt experienced by other researchers such as Harr (2001). On the one hand, there could be contradictions in the same child’s accounts; on the other hand, there was also omission of or confusion about details when they tried to recall past experiences. Sometimes, children would respond to my questions with ‘I don’t know’ or ‘I forgot’. Or they might keep talking about other things that seemed irrelevant to the research focus. Then, should I attribute these ‘imperfections’ to children’s impairments or age? Did I fail to engage with children? How should I interpret such data?

First of all, I examined my own expectation that the child participants would be articulate and offer sophisticated accounts. In relation to what, exactly, did their accounts ‘look’ inferior, or less complete? Wasn’t my own belief stopping me from seeing that what children had offered was indeed valuable and informative? Coming to realise how my adult status might frame my perception towards the ‘quality’ of children’s data enabled me to overcome the initial barrier (Fielding, 2004b).

In fact, there is no interview that should be seen as unsuccessful once the researcher has adopted the interviewee’s perspectives. As Michael (2004) argued, for an interviewee, an interview could be ‘characterised as anything from an enjoyable social encounter to a triumphant opportunity to make a particular point’ (p. 435). Children did not have to identify my questions and my interests as something that mattered much to them. At the same time, I should respect their right to keep things to themselves, rather than pressuring them to ‘feed’ me with the information I needed. I should ask: In what way was the interview a ‘success’? What could I possibly learn from children?

In particular, when it comes to silence in interviews, there could be various ways of interpreting how and why children offer no clear answers (Booth & Booth, 1996; Bucknall, 2014). Lewis (2010) argued that it was important for a researcher to explicitly discuss how children’s silence was interpreted and responded to. She suggested that researchers should reflect on the epistemological position, cultural

context, researchers' responses, power relations, the child's point of view, the method of managing silence, the place of silence in a talk, and ways of reporting silences. For example, the interview with one child participant, Wu, was very hard to make sense of because he kept saying 'That's OK' about things and people in the school. Did I fail to balance the power relations between him and me? Were the research activities not interesting enough? However, being indifferent or neutral could have been his way of understanding his less satisfying experiences; he, too, was marginalised in the class with almost no friends. I was also careful to be inclusive of multiple voices, to avoid allowing some children's voices to override others' because of being more articulate (Fielding, 2004b). It required me to actively understand and interpret all children's meanings, rather than overlooking those that seemed to be hard to make sense of or contradicting the majority.

Finally, I was concerned about whether the power relations between children and myself had been balanced. I did not see any tendency for children to offer me the desired answers. When I asked for confirmation or clarification, they would point out my misunderstandings when necessary. They also asked to skip questions that they did not want to answer. I was reassured that I was not seen as an authority like a teacher whose requests had to be obeyed. All in all, the critical first step in making sense of children's data was to change my own gaze. I was certain that the child participants had told me many important things about their learning and participation in schools.

#### 5.4.2 Analytical process during data collection

Although intensive desk-based analysis took place after the fieldwork, I should note that this does not mean that there were distinct stages of data analysis. The process of making sense of the data had already been interwoven with data collection from the moment I entered the field. Walsh (2004) argued that ethnographic research was 'a constant interaction between problem formulation, data collection and data analysis'. Ball (1983) also asserted that the distinction between data collection and data analysis was 'necessarily artificial' (p. 96).

After entering the field, I soon encountered events and accounts which were strange and surprising, making my pre-assumptions and expectations rather visible. Data analysis took place in two ways during the fieldwork. First, the inquiry was guided and informed by constant interrogation of ‘what I have known so far’ and ‘what more I need to know’. For example, after visiting schools, I noticed that resource classrooms were playing quite significant roles in disabled children’s inclusion and exclusion. Thus I continued to examine how these resource classrooms had been operating and how disabled children, class teachers and resource teachers viewed such provision. The experience was precisely described by Mills and Morton (2013): ‘Each interview, text and encounter take one’s thinking forwards. Each helps one reconsider and make sense of all one’s materials in new and sometimes contradictory ways.’ (p. 123). Second, in my fieldnotes, I highlighted significant moments and emerging patterns which were worth further exploration. Some text segments were tentatively labelled. For instance, I used ‘safety issues’ to label the interactions between teachers and disabled children, when the notion of ‘keeping children safe’ was frequently invoked by teachers to justify the exclusion of disabled children from certain activities. Extended memos were also attached to keep a record of my initial ideas, hunches or instincts about the interpretation of the data.

#### 5.4.3 Data organisation

After returning to Edinburgh, I had more space and time to engage with the data in depth, and so to grapple with their messiness, contingency, confusions and contradictions. Some collected materials were not taken into consideration for analysis: the photo prompts were not treated as data so I did not interpret the social meanings of the images. Also, the schools’ reports of LRC implementation, prepared for inspection, were not considered because teachers confessed that ‘lesson plans’ or comments on individual children shown in the documents might not be genuine:



given the already heavy workload, sometimes they had to make things up to quickly finish such paperwork<sup>34</sup>.

### *Translating, transcribing and organising data*

This research was conducted in China, where English is not the native language. All interviews and fieldnotes were in Chinese, which entailed issues of translation. Nes, Abma, Jonsson and Deeg (2010) noted that language difference mattered because language was used to express meanings and shaped how meaning was constructed; thus a good translation should be able to give readers access to the meaning at its source. I decided to perform analysis with the original language, so I could retain the socially and culturally significant meanings of words and ways of expression. In practical terms, it was also impossible to translate all the texts into English, given limited time and resources. Indeed, the quality of translation could not be automatically guaranteed by employing external translators. I could also lose the opportunity to gain the experience of making sense to an international audience.

I transcribed all interviews into electronic documents in Chinese. Although the process was time-consuming (it took one month), I did not seek other people's help because first, I needed to strictly protect participants' identities; second, by listening to the recordings again, I was able to regain a sense of being present with the participants. Instead of feeling bored, I found the process of transcription interesting and engaging. I further ensured the accuracy of participants' accounts by highlighting signs of hesitation, silence and emotional responses such as laughing. I noted down emerging patterns and reflected on the interactions during interviews. For example, I examined the possibility that children were only complying with my wishes. I also did not 'polish' or 'correct' participants' accounts to make them seem flawless, though there could be errors in grammar or wording.

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<sup>34</sup> One interesting observation was that a teacher would be requested to present a lesson plan to demonstrate his/her classroom teaching practices. Two separate columns were given in the pre-set form as 'what you would do for the LRC pupils' and 'what you would do for normal children'. This reflected the special educational thinking imposed by the implementation of LRC policy: Teachers should do something 'special' or 'different' for disabled children from what they did for the rest of the pupils.

I only translated the excerpts that I needed to present findings into English at a later stage. Filep (2009) pointed out the difference between literal translation and ‘free’ translation: the former tried to show what the original text literally looked like and the latter involved translators using their interpretations of the implicit messages in local contexts to construct more readable texts. In this research, I translated the texts directly without adding my personal interpretation. However, I included rich descriptions and necessary contextual information to support the understanding of meanings (Nes et al., 2010). While translating, I had both English and Chinese readers in mind, as the translated texts needed to make sense to both<sup>35</sup>. The slang, specific terms, metaphors and Shanghai dialects were kept, as they often carried cultural meanings in Chinese society. I attached ‘*Pinyin*’ when necessary. For instance, a ‘class teacher’ is called ‘*Banzhuren*’ in Chinese, which literally means ‘the director of a class’, highlighting the leading role of the class teacher in managing the class community. ‘Student cadres’ (*Xuesheng Ganbu*) is used instead of ‘student leaders’, since some pupils are chosen as candidates to become future communist cadres.

I indexed all the observational data of lessons and activities, so that events or dialogues involving a certain participant could be easily located, which facilitated cross-checking between the fieldnotes and the interview transcripts. I made a table that showed all children’s arrangements of the photos during interviews, including the reasons they gave, which made children’s preferences for various teachers’ classroom practices more noticeable. In addition, to quickly grasp what was in the data, I formulated a summary of the topics covered in the interviews, such as ‘seating plan’ or ‘peer relationships’, which served as a useful reminder of all available responses from the participants, regardless of how frequently a certain topic was mentioned.

### *Using NVivo*

With hundreds of pages of text at hand, I attempted to use CAQDAS (computer-assisted qualitative data-analysis software) to aid the process of analysing data.

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<sup>35</sup> My experience of translating academic publications from English to Chinese and teaching Mandarin as a foreign language in British classrooms greatly benefitted the process of translation.

NVivo 10 was chosen because it could accommodate the Chinese language and operate on Mac. It was also an available resource in the university and sufficient for this research (which involved one researcher, a single form of data and a small sample). The main reason for using CAQDAS was that its basic function of coding, retrieving and searching could enable researchers to link elements and examine relations more efficiently (Hoover & Koerber, 2011). It could store data from multiple sources. I was able to extract data segments sharing the same code or containing a certain keyword, to compare and analyse meanings across participants and data sets (Wiltshier, 2011). Definitions of the codes could be added and revised easily so as to immediately apply them to corresponding segments, the changes in which could be recorded automatically. Short memos could also be attached to help document potential interpretations. In addition, the retrieving function facilitated the writing-up of research findings, when I needed to refer to quotes or events.

However, as many researchers have warned, the software does not do the analysis itself (Hoover & Koerber, 2011). The ‘speedy’ coding might make researchers think less before putting down a code (Richards & Morse, 2007). My experience was that the software assisted with the ‘physical’ work of performing analysis of qualitative data, while I completed the ‘art’ work of understanding and interpreting the meanings contained in the data. Therefore, it is important to avoid simplifying the analysis process into ‘stitches’, but rather to remember to ‘reweave the cloth’ to retain the richness of information (Richards, 1999).

#### 5.4.4 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis was adopted as the approach for systematically making sense of the data because I was interested in understanding the participants’ meanings and the prevailing patterns and beliefs underpinning disabled children’s learning and participation in regular schools. Braun and Clarke (2006) noted that the approach had been widely used in qualitative research but was much less branded. In simple words, it is ‘a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 79). The approach suited the nature of this qualitative and exploratory inquiry by virtue of accommodating different theoretical stances (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas, 2013). The child participants’ and teacher

participants' views and experiences were the units of analysis, embedded in the contexts of their classes and schools.

### *Reading and re-reading*

I read and re-read the fieldnotes and interview transcripts, as described by Bernard (2006), who wrote that 'you live with them, handle them, read them over and over again ... and eventually get a feel for what's in them' (p. 406). It was crucial for me to be very familiar with all the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mills & Morton, 2013). Reading the data made it easy for me to recall the field experiences: What was the setting like? What seemed to be ordinary and what seemed to be strange? How did I feel about what was happening? Such a process was like re-entering the field but with more explicit analytical purposes, and during it I asked myself: What is going on? What is the participant trying to say? What is this all about? I kept marking out issues that interested, surprised or puzzled me, and expanding notes, memos and summaries to illuminate further analysis. At this stage, I was not eliminating any raw data: even if some data seemed irrelevant or particularly significant, I was aware that my perceptions of what was prominent might change later when the analysis evolved<sup>36</sup>.

### *Coding work*

There could be various definitions of codes. To summarise, codes are labels with symbolic meanings that capture descriptive or analytical characteristics of a segment of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles et al., 2014; Richards & Morse, 2007; Saldaña, 2009). DeGuir-Gunby, Marshall and McCulloch (2011) noted that coding acted as the linking process between data and theory. Although sometimes 'codes' and 'categories' are used interchangeably (e.g. Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995), in this research, categories were used to mean upper-abstract labels to codes (Saldaña, 2009).

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<sup>36</sup> The main 'noise' was other children's experiences of marginalisation and exclusion that were documented in the fieldnotes. Not being able to represent these voices is one of the limitations of this research. However, such information helped me gain a better sense of the overall ethos in schools.

Researchers have tried to differentiate various types of coding or codes. The most basic categorisation depends on the extent to which a code explicitly draws on theories, such as the differentiation of semantic/latent coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006) or data-driven/theory-driven coding (DeGuir-Gunby et al., 2011). Richards and Morse (2007) distinguished three kinds of coding: descriptive coding to store information; topic coding to sort materials; and analytical coding to develop concepts. Miles et al. (2014) laid out a much more detailed list including descriptive coding, in-vivo coding, process coding, emotion coding, values coding, evaluation coding and so on. It was helpful to have the list for reference to remind me of alternative choices for the codes. However, I argue that for the same segment of text, researchers could label different codes with various levels of abstraction. It would be problematic to impose pre-determined types of codes because the point of coding should be to actively capture the essential meanings rather than to engage in some 'technical' process (Richards & Morse, 2007).

In order to stay open to the data, in the first cycle of coding I conducted splitting coding (Saldaña, 2009) to map out emerging issues in the data inductively. Detailed codes were generated which were close to the data. For example, a resource teacher, Ms Zhang, explained to me that she was not sure whether the 'finger gymnastics' she asked disabled children to do during her lesson was helpful. I coded this segment as 'unclear rationale'. Nevertheless, in DeCuir-Gunby et al.'s (2011) research, they used the code 'pedagogical struggles' when a 'teacher expresses uncertainty, lack of clarity, and/or concern, about some aspect of the "how, what, or when" of classroom practice' (p. 146). It can be seen that my codes at this level tended to be less abstract, with categories for teachers' struggles or dilemmas being developed later.

It was extremely helpful to pay attention to how specific notions or terms were used and constructed by participants. For instance, when teachers were asked how they supported disabled children in schools, they frequently used the phrase 'caring more' to coin the principle underlying their practices. It made me wonder: what practices were reflecting this principle? Referring to the observational data, I found that these teachers seemed to only look after disabled children's daily needs, while marginalising them in learning. Similarly, the notion of 'sameness' was often

mentioned by teachers, who felt that there were no fundamental differences among pupils even if some were labelled as disabled – emphasising a commitment to ‘all’.

I drew on Hammersley and Atkinson’s (1995) suggestion to distinguish different phenomena by developing typologies. For instance, in terms of children’s experiences of peer supporters, three types of supporters were identified: tutor, carer and controller. It was also useful to examine why some teachers seemed to be acting more as ‘inclusive’ teachers while some were not (Seale, 2004).

In addition, in-vivo codes were deliberately applied to capture distinctive contextual meanings. For example, teachers used the phrase ‘wade across the stream by feeling the way (*Mozhe Shitou Guohe*)’ as a metaphor to describe the trial-and-error process of promoting disabled children’s inclusion in regular schools when guidance was missing. Such a notion was also prevalent in China’s policy discourse, to highlight a sense of uncertainty in the era of reform.

In all, the process of coding was circular, recursive and iterative: I went back and forth to refine the codes. It involved intensive checking of the accuracy and consistency of the codes’ meanings, a process which was assisted by the retrieving function of NVivo. As a bridge between data and theory, when I created a code, I also considered its relationships with other codes in order to shed light on categories, and took memos to note down possible interpretations, propositions or assertions (Richards & Morse, 2007). Four separate code lists were formulated from each data set (fieldnotes, children’s interviews, class teachers’ interviews and resource teachers’ interviews). Many issues were broadly shared across data sets, though there were also specific codes, given the differences in data sources.

### *Categorising and interweaving data sets*

Categorising and interweaving data sets took place iteratively as the second cycle of coding. I used the strategy of identifying ‘pathways’ for linking data sets (Strøm & Fagermoen, 2012). The observational data of certain events and the way participants understood them were compared against each other to inform shared categories. I also checked whether a child’s comments during the interview were consistent with the information that I recorded in the fieldnotes. I integrated children’s and teachers’

data through shared categories. For example, teachers frequently described how they understood disabled children and how their practices were informed by it. Turning to children's data, I noticed how children negotiated who they were through their interactions with teachers. I was then able to reach a more synthesised picture of the construction of LRC pupils' identities.

### *Significant events and illustrations*

The process of analysis, however, was impeded from moving forward after coding. The thick description in original texts was fragmented into scattered abstracts. In other words, the craftwork of coding seemed to counterbalance the holistic quality of ethnographic data, which were rich in meanings from the outset. To compensate for this limitation of coding, I went back to the fieldnotes and interview transcripts to review those significant moments. These events were not only the ones that looked appealing or dramatic. They also included those scenarios of mundane routine which were 'ordinary' enough to make me ask: How could this keep happening on a daily basis? What processes were reinforcing the recurrent phenomena? These incidents were critical for their significance to the overall representation, which greatly furthered my understanding and reflections. Some of them were presented in the form of illustrations, as exemplars of the key lessons learned from the data (see Chapter 6).

### *Structuring the presentation*

After the inductive process of coding, the emerging patterns and issues in the data led to the identification of themes. Richard and Morse (2007) vividly noted that a theme resembled 'a common thread that runs through the data', like the main melody in an opera (p. 135). I retained my skepticism towards conceptual and empirical verification by examining whether the evidence was consistent and whether there were counterexamples (Miles et al., 2014: 278). The initially identified themes from inductive analysis included the construction of LRC pupils' identities, children's experiences of peer relationships, the role of resource classrooms, and facilitators of and barriers to children's learning and participation. However, these themes taken together seemed to fail to offer a satisfying account of the complex inclusive and

exclusionary processes within regular schools. Thus I returned to the *Framework for Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) and re-organised the categories around the elements of participation – access, collaboration, achievement and diversity – to make the research findings better structured in relation to disabled children's inclusion and exclusion.

## 5.5 Summary

This chapter has been devoted to a more detailed description, justification and evaluation of the research methods that I employed to collect and analyse data. I introduced the rationale for convenience sampling and the reasons for narrowing it down to the group of children with learning difficulties. Basic information about child and teacher participants was provided. Then I discussed how the fieldwork for the formal study was conducted. I illustrated the advantages of participant observation, my role in-between that of observer and participant, and how fieldnotes were written up. Several participatory activities were adopted to engage with disabled children, which were productive and effective in balancing power relations with children and encouraging them to express their views. Through individual interviews, teachers also shared their perspectives and experiences of promoting disabled children's learning and participation. I explained why data analysis should also be seen as a social practice and how I overcame my initial doubts over children's responses. The data were thematically analysed through an iterative process, which was performed on Chinese texts to retain the social and cultural meaning of the language. NVivo was used to assist the analysis. I described how the analytical process during fieldwork informed the data collection. Then I discussed each stage of the process of data analysis, following a loose timeline, from coding and categorising, noting significant moments, and interweaving data sets, to the structuring of the final presentation.





## Section three: Making sense of the data

### Chapter 6 Findings and interpretations

#### 6.1 Introduction

This research explores the current status of disabled children's inclusion in regular schools in Shanghai under the implementation of LRC policy, through a qualitative and ethnographic approach. It draws on the theoretical framework which recognises the rights of disabled children to have their voices heard, and highlights the great value of pupils' views for the development of inclusive practice. I recruited as participants 11 LRC pupils who were identified as having learning difficulties, and their class and resource teachers. Multiple methods were used including participant observation, participatory activities with children and interviews with teachers, which enabled me to collect rich and contextual data on how disabled children and their teachers understand, experience and negotiate learning and participation, and on the critical facilitators of and barriers to the process of promoting these children's inclusion.

As discussed in section 5.4, the collected data were thematically analysed and the issues emerging from the more inductive analysis were further integrated into and structured by the *Framework of Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). The voices of children and teachers were interwoven and balanced to approach a more comprehensive representation of the complex schooling processes. In this chapter, I will present the research findings and interpretations concerning the four elements of participation – access, collaboration, achievement and diversity, and reflect on the questions of *who*, *what* and *why* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Illustrations of significant events are also included which capture the essential messages conveyed by the data.

In section 6.2, I start with an examination of how disabled children joined and stayed in their regular schools and regular classes, while becoming obliged to attend lessons in resource classrooms with the implementation of LRC policy. Section 6.2.3 explores disabled children's access to schools' curriculums and extra-curricular

activities. Then I illustrate the extent to which the child participants were granted access to spaces and places in schools and classrooms.

Section 6.3 presents findings on how collaboration was reflected in the schooling processes. Section 6.3.1 describes how disabled children learned with their peers in either an inclusive or marginalised way. Teachers' role in encouraging children to learn together is highlighted. In section 6.3.2, I particularly scrutinise how teachers learned with and from children. Section 6.3.3 is devoted to how teachers, especially regular and resource teachers, worked with each other to negotiate disabled children's learning and participation. In section 6.3.4, I introduce the subject of how teachers sought support from wider communities.

Section 6.4 focuses on disabled children's learning achievements in regular schools. In section 6.4.1, I describe the child participants' aspirations, their experiences of learning and how their learner identities were fluidly constructed. I stress the impacts of disability labels on children's learning. Section 6.4.2 describes how disabled children's marginalised position was reinforced in the performative school culture. In section 6.4.3, I underline how teachers demonstrated inclusive practice, which addressed the learning and participation of all pupils, including disabled children.

Section 6.5 grapples with the question of whether disabled children were fully accepted in school communities, focusing more on the social aspects of their school lives. In section 6.5.1, I present findings on disabled children's social relationships with other children in terms of friendships, bullying and the sense of belonging. Section 6.5.2 offers more insights into whether disabled children's differences and voices were recognised by teachers. Section 6.5.3 touches on teachers' perceptions as to whether they were valued as contributors, which also constitutes an important aspect of inclusive culture in school communities.

## 6.2 Participation and access

In simple words, access means 'being there' (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Granting and securing disabled children's access to regular settings is the preliminary and essential condition for inclusive education. In the case of disabled

children enrolled in regular schools, do they have the same access as other children to classrooms, the curriculum and spaces?

### 6.2.1 Joining the school and the class

As discussed in section 2.3.3.2, in China, although the implementation of LRC policy legitimises disabled children's access to regular schools and classrooms, children's rights are conditioned by their perceived abilities to adjust themselves to the existing provision in regular education (MoE et al., 1989; NPCSC, 1990; NPCSC, 2008). In Shanghai, when disabled children reach school age, parents need to choose between regular or special schools. However, the situation in the participating jurisdiction was slightly different.

#### *Compulsory enrolment in regular schools*

The director of the SEGC, Mr Liang, revealed the high demand among families to send their children to the single available special school in the jurisdiction, because the school was considered better equipped with specialists and facilities, and also because parents wanted to protect children from potential discrimination in regular schools. Nevertheless, since there were not enough places in the special schools, regular schools were obliged to take in disabled children, complying with the strict stipulation of compulsory education, namely a 100% rate of enrolment at primary and junior secondary level for school-aged children. In this way, the obstacles for disabled children to access regular schools appeared to be removed, though this certainly did not mean that regular schools necessarily welcomed disabled children. Indeed, among regular schools in the same catchment area, there could still be rejection by some schools. For instance, Mingzhu School was often asked to accept pupils, such as autistic children, who were denied access to or excluded from another neighbourhood school, which had a reputation for high academic performance.

All the child participants were enrolled, almost effortlessly, in regular schools like their peers<sup>37</sup>. None of them encountered difficulties in accessing regular schools on grounds of their abilities. Three children, Ting, Li and Rui, had already held the

relevant medical diagnostic records before they reached school age. Other children were designated after being enrolled in regular schools, when teachers and parents noticed the challenges of academic learning for them.

### *Joining a regular class*

The way of allocating pupils into classes varied across schools; however, all schools stressed that the main principle was to mix children to the maximum extent rather than grouping or streaming them. Most schools used computer programmes to allocate children randomly into different classes with gender balance. Only Yulan School would conduct an ‘interview’ with every child when s/he first visited the school. Then children would be loosely categorised as of higher, average or lower abilities. The random allocation afterwards would make sure that every class could have a similar intake of pupils with varied abilities. From the school’s perspective, on the one hand, such practice could counter the inequality of streaming; on the other hand, teachers saw it as particularly fair. This was because a teacher’s accountability was mainly judged by pupils’ performances; hence teachers preferred to have pupils ‘standing at the same starting line’ so that later the variation in pupils’ performances from different classes could be used as evidence of the quality of teaching. However, in Yulan School, a small number of children would be categorised as ‘special’ and these children did not enter the database for random allocation. All class teachers would be assembled to do a ‘drawing of lots’ for these children, as if having a ‘special’ child in one’s class was a misfortune. Teachers had to accept the children they picked.

All child participants joined their regular classes from Year 1. It was not easy for children to recall their early days at school during interviews. Children like Qi, Dan and Ning did remember the change in teachers’ attitudes and practices over time. They were welcomed like everyone else when they first arrived, but soon teachers started to treat them differently. For example, Qi sat at the front of the classroom in his early days, but when, later on, his class teacher Ms Xia moved him to the back corner, he missed being at the front. Dan reflected that she was allowed to be a

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<sup>37</sup> Only Xin had to apply twice because she was not counted as a resident because of lodging in a relative’s flat in the catchment area for Yulan School.

student cadre at first but was removed from the position after teachers got to know her better.

### 6.2.2 Staying in the school and the class

In Chinese primary schools, it is not common to exclude children from schools or transfer them to different classes. Usually a child stays with his/her classmates in a regular class throughout the school years – being part of a class community (*Banjiti*).

#### *The condition imposed in exchange for staying in regular schools*

All child participants were without experience of special schools. Since the surrounding adults kept the information about their disability/LRC labels hidden, children might not even be aware of the existence of special schools. In spite of children's negative experiences, they did not at any point face the risk of being excluded from the regular schools. Indeed, the fact that there were no available places in the special school reinforced children's placement in the regular schools, but had less effect on their rights to study alongside peers.

According to the director Mr Liang, regular schools' resistance to disabled children focused on whether these children might 'drag down' pupils' academic performances, which were critical for schools when seeking to secure funding and resources. In past years, in order to ease schools' worries while still assessing disabled children's progress in learning, Mr Liang tried out a method for making LRC pupils' academic results 'look better' on league tables:

I used to do a project on how to assess the academic learning of children with Mild Learning Difficulties. If you assess these pupils based on individuals, who should formulate the exam paper? How? Are you asking subject teachers to do that? Parents are very worried that their children might be abandoned once they do not sit in exams. But it is also not fair for them to do the same exam. What sort of model is fair? How to do this assessment anyway? When I just started this job, I carried out a pilot study in five schools. I suddenly had this idea (*Painaodai*) about a formula: Exam results/IQ x 100%. I know that it is not scientific to use IQ scores like this. But I wanted to figure out whether some type of assessment, no matter what it was, could promote the implementation of LRC.

Then I found that it was indeed better than nothing, especially for those children with mild conditions. In those schools, children and teachers were all happy because quite often a child could reach 'pass'.

(Fieldnotes, 02/09/2013)

However, his proposal to higher-level policy-makers was disapproved. The final decision was to exchange LRC pupils' continued enrolment in regular schools (at primary level) for the elimination of their academic results from league tables. Mr Liang felt that this was an inevitable compromise that had to be made to preserve disabled children's access to regular schools:

We don't include their results because we have not found any other, better way of assessment. How can you reflect their academic learning in an equitable and fair way? Now there are two extremes in schools. You either tick them out or you see everyone as the same – everything counts. I think neither of these two is good enough. Isn't there a middle way?

(Fieldnotes, 02/09/2013)

As a result of losing track of LRC pupils' academic performances, Mr Liang worried that the teaching provision for disabled children might thus become unreliable. Most class teacher participants were found to welcome such a policy, because the pressure on them to help these children reach certain standards was significantly reduced, and their performance-related bonus could be more easily secured. Only Ms Qian felt that these children's results should still be included in league tables, because this was the best way to recognise children's progress.

The concern over pupils' academic performance was also reflected in how schools perceived disabled children with different categories of impairments. Schools seemed to be more tolerant of children with physical or sensory impairments, because they often could keep up with the standards. By contrast, children with intellectual challenges were seen as the 'real problems'. Mr Liang admitted that there was a tendency for children with lower academic performance levels to be more prone to nomination by schools for the LRC designation.

Although favouring the idea of eliminating LRC pupils' academic results from league tables, teachers might not particularly support the practice of labelling some children as 'special', as commented on by Ms Cui:

In fact, intuitively, I don't think this should happen. I mean, Learning in Regular Classrooms. Why would you make a child an LRC pupil? Isn't that differentiating him/her as not normal?

(Interviews, Ms Cui, class teacher)

Nevertheless, teachers felt that they were subject to schools' decisions about identification and designation. For example, in Yulan School, it was not Ms Jia who nominated Xin as a special child who should be medically examined; she was pressured to do so by the headteacher who spotted Xin's unsatisfying academic results, for the sake of the school's overall performance.

### *Leaving regular classrooms*

All child participants went to school every day like other children; only Rui had more sick leaves. None of them had the experience of being transferred to other classes. In Chinese schools, all pupils from the same class share the identical timetable: they learn all the lessons together apart from the variation in interest clubs. Nevertheless, with the opening of resource classrooms, most child participants except Dan and Lulu from Wenyuan School were required to spend a certain time in a separate classroom away from their classmates. Schools were granted autonomy to decide which LRC pupils needed to go to resource classrooms, how much time children should spend studying there, and what was taught. Among LRC pupils, it was often children with learning difficulties or behavioural challenges who were asked to attend resource lessons; schools found it easier to accommodate children with other impairments in regular classrooms.

In a situation where all pupils from the same classroom stayed together all the time, creating a different timetable for LRC pupils was complicated, involving intensive negotiation among teachers. However, children themselves had little say in whether they should attend resource lessons – they could only accept teachers' decisions. Five out of nine child participants felt reluctant to leave their main regular classrooms. Rui did not want to go to the resource classroom because he would miss what was happening in his main classroom and could not join in with what all his classmates were doing. For Sha and Xin, it was humiliating to go to a resource classroom. Sha had to 'sneak out' of her main classroom when she was leaving it. If



other children noticed, she would lie, saying that she just needed to go to the toilet. During one resource lesson that I observed, when her classmates happened to be in the corridor outside the resource classroom, Xin suddenly crouched down to hide under the table, saying that she was ‘freaked out’ because she did not want to be seen.

As a strategy for negotiating the situation, Li, Ning and Rui often deliberately ‘forgot’ the time for their resource lessons. They tried to skip such lessons if possible, though most of the time they were caught by teachers and sent back to the resource classrooms. The exception was in Wenyuan School, where Ms Shen asked all her LRC pupils to stay in the regular classroom because she felt there was no need for them to study in another classroom, but was confident that these children were able to learn in her classroom, a decision which was supported by the headteacher.

In Mingzhu School, class teachers wanted to add more hours to the resource lessons, justifying the request by the benefits to children’s emotional wellbeing from being away from the high-pressure academic learning in regular classrooms. The resource teacher, Ms Zhang, was resistant to the request because she did not want to turn the resource classroom into a ‘special class’, which violated the intentions behind the inclusion of disabled children in regular schools. Contrastingly, in Hongxing School, class teachers Ms Ai and Ms Dai did not support the idea of sending their pupils away to the resource classroom. However, they could not challenge the need to open resource classrooms, which was positioned as a strategy for promoting disabled children’s inclusion. They chose to take children’s feelings into consideration when negotiating the timetables. For instance, they avoided making children miss their favourite subjects and tried to minimise the potential negative labelling effects. Although their LRC pupils did not attend any meetings or join in the conversations, the presence of children’s voices was realised by teachers in the decision-making process.

### **6.2.3 Accessing the curriculum**

All state-funded primary schools in Shanghai adhere to the same local standard curriculum. Special schools adopt a different curriculum, which is not applied in the

provision for LRC pupils. Thus it is down to individual regular schools and teachers to decide what kind of curriculum LRC pupils should access.

### *Accessing the standard curriculum*

Many teacher participants did not recognise the standard curriculum as suitable for the child participants, mainly because it was already a very demanding one for the pupils as a whole to keep up with. During the interviews, many child participants also mentioned that some lessons could be just too hard for them to understand, which was especially so in the late primary years.

All child participants attended the same lessons with their classmates, except for resource lessons and interest clubs. Whether they were able to access the curriculum varied considerably, depending on the subjects and individual teachers' classroom practices. Children and teachers tended to identify maths as the most challenging subject, while other subjects such as PE (Physical Education) or music might be easier. In lessons where all pupils were effectively engaged, teachers often prepared sufficient tasks and materials for children at different stages to work with towards similar learning objectives, with variation in how challenging a task could be, or what kind of assistance with the task might help each pupil to learn. Some teachers would ask pupils to choose from all available tasks, which not only encouraged all children to learn, but also avoided the risk of marking out the child participants.

In some lessons that I observed, the child participants were almost completely left out with no access to the curriculum. Teachers paid little attention to what could be provided for these children and how to engage them in learning. The child participants were left sitting on their seats doing nothing. Sometimes they were writing homework for other subjects, which teachers did not mind as long as they did not interrupt other pupils' learning. In a maths lesson in Yulan School, all children enjoyed the lesson except Li – teaching and learning continued as though she were not sitting there in the classroom. After being overlooked for more than two years, she found it impossible to grasp what was being taught. The maths teacher came to me when the lesson finished, saying: 'She cannot understand anything'. Not surprisingly, Li categorised the photo of this lesson as 'disliked things about school'.

Similarly, the child participants' access to the curriculum could be impeded by failure to obtain the necessary tools. On the one hand, teachers might fail to check whether every child was able to work on the learning tasks. On the other hand, other pupils could refuse to share tools with the child participants. Illustration 1 describes how Rui and Qi could not participate in learning simply because they had no essential tools at hand. In the interview, Rui recalled how upset he was about this.

### Illustration 1: Denied access to learning tools

Rui's art lesson: The learning objective for the art lesson is paper-cut. A basket of scissors is passed on one by one and every pupil would have a pair of scissors to use. Sitting at the back of the classroom, Rui is the last one to take over the basket. There is only a broken pair left. He starts to beg other pupils to lend their pairs but receives no help. He spends the whole lesson doing this. The teacher has not checked whether everyone was able to get on with the task. When it is almost the end of the lesson and most children have finished their work, Rui finally decides to 'steal' one pair from a girl when she leaves her desk temporarily. All other children except Rui have enjoyed the lesson a lot and the teacher takes a selfie with them celebrating the achievements. When the bell rings, he has not even finished half of the work.

Qi's art lesson: The task is to cut and paste patterns. When the teacher asks a student cadre to hand out the scissors, the girl pretends that she does not see Qi at all though he keeps putting his hand up high, calling out her name. After she gives a pair of scissors to the boy sitting right before Qi, she turns her back and walks away. Qi runs after her, begging. Finally the cadre gives him one pair. After cutting, he needs a tube of glue to do the pasting. The teacher only gives tubes of glue to three pupils including the cadre, saying that other children should go to them to borrow one. Qi thus goes to the cadre but she ignores him even if she is not using the glue at the moment. Qi goes to a couple of other children and still fails. After all children have finished the task and returned their tools, the teacher finally comes to Qi and puts a tube of glue on his desk straightaway – 'Bam!' – the sound of the plastic tube hitting the wooden desk. Qi looks up at the teacher and apologises: 'I will go and buy the glue right after school today.'

### *Impacts of narrowed curriculum*

Another prominent issue surrounding access to the curriculum was that none of the four schools was running a complete curriculum. Behind the appealing official timetables showing a diversity of subjects, in reality time for subjects like 'society and morality', music, art or 'inquiring' was often transferred to the core subjects –

Chinese, English and maths. Subjects like ICT (Information and Communication Technology), calligraphy or natural science were only run in the semester just before the final examination. Clearly, the rationale of such an arrangement was to prepare pupils for better academic performance in the core subjects, which mattered a great deal in the league tables. The child participants told me that some subjects in their timetables were never taught. The teaching of the non-core subjects seemed to be chaotic due to constant ‘interruption’ by the core subjects. During my visits, I saw teachers forgetting about what should be taught. I saw Year 2 and Year 5 classes learning the same content, which seemed to be randomly chosen from textbooks. PE was somehow ‘unmovable’ because the requirement to guarantee every child one hour of exercise per day was enforced. However, because of the severe air pollution in the country, schools’ PE lessons and outdoor activities were frequently cancelled.

The impacts of the narrowed curriculum were obvious for the child participants. The lack of diversity of subjects meant that children’s individualities in their interests and skills were not recognised. For example, because of often being marginalised in his class, Wu enjoyed some non-core subjects much more. In a lesson on ‘labor skills’, he demonstrated his skill to accurately draw perfect shapes, and his high-standard work was much admired by other pupils. The teacher, who had very low expectations of Wu’s ability to accomplish the task, was also surprised (see Illustration 6 for the teacher’s reaction). Later in the lesson Wu helped the pupils sitting around him learn how to draw. When the teacher gave out more tasks, he opted for the challenging ones. Wu also liked nature science; he listened to the teacher carefully and actively asked and answered questions, even if many other pupils were chatting and playing because the teacher did not manage discipline well. Without a curriculum addressing a wider range of children’s achievements, pupils like Wu could lose opportunities to explore and celebrate learning, and teachers and other children would be left without the chance to learn about these subjects.

The bias over what was and was not ‘worthy’ of being learned by the child participants also influenced the timetabling of resource lessons, because they often required children to give up certain lessons in their regular classrooms. Some regular teachers argued that children should not skip lessons on the core subjects, because

after all the knowledge was still important and if children skipped these lessons, it would take longer for teachers to help them make enough progress to catch up. However, there would be no tutoring if they missed non-core subjects like music, art or PE. Thus the resource lessons were often scheduled to replace non-core subjects or interest clubs. For Qi, due to the timetabling of the resource lessons, he missed music for the whole semester, which was not even noticed by teachers. In addition, teachers made their decisions based on what subjects they assumed to be less useful for the child participants. For instance, the resource teacher Ms Guan insisted that there was no point in children with learning difficulties studying English because it was very unlikely that they would go abroad; they should instead spend more time on Chinese which they had to use on a daily basis. Teachers' beliefs might contradict children's preferences: Sha and Rui really liked learning English, because they found it interesting and enjoyable.

### *Curriculum in resource classrooms*

What was taught and learned in the separate space of resource classrooms? This research found that what children could expect highly depended on resource teachers' individual approaches. In Yulan School, the resource teacher Ms Zhao mainly focused on academic learning. She drew on the standard curriculum and provided intensive tutoring for LRC pupils to help them keep up with what was being taught in their regular classrooms, but used a relaxing and encouraging way of teaching, with more activities and groupwork. The child participants who went to her resource classroom identified the resource lessons as helpful for their learning. Nevertheless, Li claimed that she did not like the rehabilitation facilities in the resource classroom because 'they are for young children' (Figure 6.1).

Ms Zhang and Ms Guan decided to develop their own curriculum, which showed much less resemblance to the standard curriculum. In Mingzhu School, Ms Zhang's resource lesson often consisted of three parts: finger gymnastics, tutoring (by herself or volunteering regular teachers), and free playtime. Ms Zhang assumed that the physical movement involved in finger gymnastics and free play should be beneficial for disabled children's neurodevelopment and emotional health. However, what was taught to children seemed to be problematic: the learning tasks were often designed

to be too easy for the three Year 4 pupils, so a question remained as to whether learning happened. For example, in a resource lesson that I observed, pupils were asked to fill in colours for two shapes of apple. After they finished the task in less than one minute, they were allowed to play. Ms Zhang carefully collected the papers, saying that these could be shown to inspectors. Figure 6.2 captured the scene on the day of inspection, when Ms Zhang set out the pupils' work. Sha commented that although she liked the resource classroom because Ms Zhang was really nice, she felt that the resource lessons helped little with her learning. Qi even understood the resource classroom mainly as a place to play. He liked spending time there and wanted to change the whole school into a big resource classroom.



Figure 6.1 The 'playful' resource classroom

In Hongxing School, Ms Guan designed activity-based lessons, which often involved learning objectives around practical skills that were relevant for everyday living and social communication, such as polite manners when greeting teachers, or tidying up schoolbags. Ms Guan argued that disabled children needed these skills more than the ability to write correct answers in exams. However, although children felt that what they were learning in Ms Guan's resource classroom could be fun and useful, they still preferred to stay with their peers in regular classrooms. Class teachers in the same school were uncertain about the curriculum in the resource classroom. Reflecting on the curriculum in regular classrooms which focuses on academic

learning, Ms Qian felt that although she would like to have her LRC pupil Wu staying in the regular classroom, the child might have the chance to learn something more relevant to his real life in a separate classroom: ‘It is a weigh-up of what’s more helpful for a child. Then I tend to agree with this. Anyway, you have to accept what it entails.’



Figure 6.2 Ready for inspection

### *Accessing extra-curricular activities*

Apart from the academic curriculum that is compulsory for all pupils, there are many kinds of extra-curricular activities available in schools to enrich children’s experiences, such as school-wide competitions in sports, art or science, field trips to leisure or learning sites, and interest clubs (e.g. chess, knitting, football etc.). In Chinese classrooms, pupils are also involved in taking care of their classroom space and helping teachers. A small number of pupils would be elected student cadres<sup>38</sup>. Through interviews, I found that the child participants’ opportunities to access extra-curricular activities were largely restricted.

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<sup>38</sup> Once elected, student cadres would assist teachers with management. They might help to collect and hand out assignments or discipline pupils’ behaviour. They are often expected to be supportive and act as role models. The system involves three hierarchies: group-level, class-level and school-level.

Teachers tended to let the child participants take part in only those activities which took place within a class community. However, these children were granted few chances to access school-wide competitions, mainly because they were seen as incapable of winning the contests. Teachers stated that whether a pupil, as representative, could stand out mattered a great deal for the whole class's reputation, by preventing the class from 'losing face'. Ms Dai worried that other pupils might blame a disabled child if s/he participated in a competition but failed, so that these children had to be protected from such an outcome.

Although the child participants might want to take part in the competitions, they were aware that teachers would not pick them as representatives because they were seen as unable to perform well.

Yuchen: What activities have you participated at school?

Li: None. Contest. Dancing. I did not go. Neither.

Yuchen: Oh, you did not go.

Li: Yes. I did not go rope skipping either.

Yuchen: Why didn't you go?

Li: Sun...Sunday, Friday, I did not go on Friday (the school held its autumn sport game the previous Friday). The teacher did not allow me to go.

Yuchen: The teacher did not allow you to go?

Li: Yes.

Yuchen: What happened?

Li: Ms Ruan said: 'You cannot do skipping well.' She asked me to change my position to skip. She did not allow me to skip.

Yuchen: She did not let you skip. Do you want to go skipping?

Li: I want to.

(Interviews, Li, child participant)

Although children could be unhappy about such arrangements, they might accept it for the benefit of the class community. Sha put up her hand when Ms Ding asked who would like to join a group-singing competition, and she was accepted. However, later on after they had practised for a while, Ms Ding asked Sha to drop out because



her voice was regarded as not fitting well with the other children's. Sha was quite upset at hearing this but she accepted the decision, feeling that she was indeed doing a favour for the whole class, as they would have a better chance of winning without her.

Teachers rarely challenged such competitive selection. For Ms Jun, there was no need to question this norm: 'We all choose the best, right?' As a way to 'compensate' LRC pupils, teachers suggested that there should be more special activities for special children. In Hongxing School, Ms Guan had already started taking LRC pupils to events organised for disabled children, and she was happy that pupils like Ning could thus have a chance to win medals in sport competitions with 'the same kind'. By contrast, Ms Shen made sure that every pupil could find a way to join whole-class activities. When Lulu missed practising for a theatre performance because she was sick, Ms Shen asked her to be the host on the day to introduce the class, so Lulu could still step onto the stage with all her classmates.

Within regular classrooms, the child participants were likely to be asked to hand over their daily duties such as cleaning, tidying up or collecting/handing out pupils' workbooks. These responsibilities, which might sound trivial to teachers, could be essential for children's sense of belonging to class communities. The child participants felt upset when other children were allocated these responsibilities of theirs. The main reason for preventing the child participants from taking up these duties was that teachers did not trust the children's ability to carry out the tasks, which was contrary to the children's own beliefs about what they were capable of. However, teachers such as Ms Ruan understood the need to engage LRC pupils in these activities; she often asked Li to help her in ways such as checking whether there was rubbish on the floor.

The child participants might also be asked not to join school trips, safety being the main concern in this case. Teachers recalled the chaos that Lulu caused when she was found missing during a visit to a park. When these children did join the trips, teachers would be extra careful and often ask other pupils to look after them. Moreover, whether a pupil could join a school trip could also be determined by the child's academic results. Ning felt sad when she could not join a trip because only

pupils who passed the exam were allowed to go. Economic issues could also make it harder for some children to join such activities, because families needed to pay extra fees. Lulu thus accepted not going on school trips to help her family save money.

In the classrooms that I visited, there appeared to be an obvious hierarchy within which student cadres ranked above other children. The child participants identified student cadres as the second decision-makers, coming closely after teachers. Once elected, the cadres would be granted the power to maintain discipline, as commented on by Ning:

The school-cadres and class-cadres, they listen to teachers. Then teachers tell them what to do. Ask them to control us. It is like, sometimes, our class teacher would teach lessons in the afternoon, and go to meetings. Then the teacher would tell the school-cadres and class-cadres about the requirements, asking them to control us during breaks. Don't run around. You will lose your points. Then, finish your homework. Lose your points.

(Interviews, Ning, child participant)

Out of all the children, only one pupil, Dan, had a very brief experience of being a group-cadre. Children understood that the most important precondition for becoming a student cadre was one's academic performance so that their chances of being elected (depending on pupils' votes and teachers' approval) were rather scarce. Dan understood her one opportunity to be a student cadre as more of a 'mistake' by teachers, because back then they did not know her well enough. Ning felt that although she would like to be a student cadre some day, and group-level sounded good enough for her, realisation of such a dream seemed pretty much hopeless:

Ning: I only hope I can get better scores.

Yuchen: Hope you can get better scores.

Ning: Hmm...nearly to be a 'one bar'<sup>39</sup>.

Yuchen: You want to wear 'one bar'?

Ning: Yes. Basically the teacher does not allow me to be it. I really want to be it. And I listen to the lecture carefully and I feel that my score is ok.

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<sup>39</sup> A student cadre would need to wear an armband showing his/her status, as shown in figure 6.3. A group-level cadre wears 'one bar'. A class-level cadre wears 'two bars'. A school-level cadre wears 'three bars'.

(the interview continues...)

Yuchen: Then have you ever told teachers that you would like to be...?

Ning: I wanted to. But I dared not. The teacher definitely would not pick me.

Yuchen: Why?

Ning: Because I don't have good results. They all have good results, like 'knowledge star', like getting scores above 95 (out of 100). Then I surely won't have any vote. I will get none. So I did not dare to tell the teacher. It would not work. The classmates have to vote or you cannot be one.

(Interviews, Ning, child participant)



Figure 6.3 Armbands for student cadres

Besides, teachers justified the exclusion of LRC pupils from school activities by the belief that completing necessary schoolwork should be the priority for these children: because they may have needed more time just to finish the schoolwork, they should spend less time on such less-important activities. Some teachers, such as Ms Ai, recognised that one of the benefits of eliminating LRC pupils' academic results from league tables was that they could feel more relaxed about giving children access to extra-curricular activities.

It was compulsory for every pupil to join one of the interest clubs available in the participating schools and running on a weekly basis. Children could choose to learn more about leisure, technology or extended academic skills that they were interested

in. Pupils from all years were mixed together in these clubs. Although children were supposed to make their own choices, teachers often intervened in the child participants' decisions. The research found that LRC pupils were likely to be allocated to interest clubs which were perceived as less intellectually demanding or safer in terms of places and activities. No child participant was able to join a sport club. Eight of them could only stay in their own classrooms and attend whatever activity was taking place there; according to teachers, these clubs, such as those for reading or knitting, were suitable for 'slow learners'. In these interest clubs, children were allowed to do other, more important things such as writing their homework, rather than participating in club activities. If the child participants chose popular clubs such as computing, they would be talked out of the choices by teachers, so places could be saved for other pupils. For example, Ms Shen convinced all her LRC pupils to do calligraphy in their main classroom although children initially wanted to try different things. She told the children that they needed to practise for the upcoming calligraphy exam (it was only a formality for LRC pupils to sit such exams). In Hongxing School, Ning and Rui could not join any of the interest clubs that they liked because they had to take resource lessons, which made them feel quite upset; but they were voiceless to change the arrangement.

#### 6.2.4 Accessing spaces and places

Pupils' access to spaces and places tended to be strictly regulated in the participating schools. During breaks, children were encouraged or requested to stay in the main classrooms to finish their homework rather than playing or socialising with each other, as teachers of core-subjects often came into the classrooms to check workbooks. Children would then form a queue to have their schoolwork corrected one by one, and teachers would answer their questions and make comments on their performances. Such practice was seen as 'hitting two birds with one stone', since it not only squeezed in more time to improve children's academic learning, but also kept safety concerns under control, which was another main target of the school inspection.

The discourse of protection was prominent in schools, based on the assumption that if children did not move around, there would be fewer accidents. In Yulan School, it

was broadcast to children that ‘your bones would become fragile in winter’, to warn them not to chase each other in the corridor. In Hongxing School, one PE lesson was cancelled because ‘the floor in the gym is too slippery’. Pupils were even asked to walk in the middle of the corridor because ‘they might hit the walls if they don’t do so’. Seeing the almost absurd concern over children’s safety in schools, Ms Guan made the following comments:

It is very problematic now that pupils are forbidden from playing outside. Maybe we can only realise that this is wrong after decades. The school is doing this in order to reduce the number of safety accidents. Because children could easily bump into each other when they are playing together. Teachers have to come into classrooms to supervise children, and then they need to do something there so they decided to offer extra tutoring. The headteachers from other schools saw this and thought that this was a quite useful strategy. Thus they went back to blame their teachers for not working hard enough. So now every school is doing this. It is so ridiculous!

(Interviews, Ms Guan, resource teacher)

### *Restricted mobility at school*

Compared to other pupils, the child participants were further restricted from accessing spaces and places. During the guided tours, they felt so excited about being able to walk around and have some freedom to access places on the campus. They frequently mentioned that they hoped they could access playgrounds during breaks and also other places surrounding the school buildings. Xin said that her favourite place was the garden: ‘There are trees, very beautiful.’ She used to play there with friends but now they were not allowed to go downstairs to access the garden anymore (Figure 6.4). Lessons and activities were regulated even in regard to when pupils could use the library. Dan remarked that pupils should be given more freedom to access the Internet in the library, for reference and entertainment.

Being positioned as ‘vulnerable’ due to their impairments, the child participants tended to be overprotected by teachers, a policy which could at the same time jeopardise children’s opportunities to participate in learning and activities. It was common to see teachers constantly interfering with and controlling where the child participants could go and how they moved around. As previously mentioned, these children might be deliberately allocated to the interest clubs that used their main

classrooms so that there would be no need for them to move to other places. In a PE lesson in which children were doing group rope skipping, Qi was asked to stand in the corner away from his classmates so he would not be harmed. He was also removed from the choir competition which each class attended as a unit, because Ms Xia worried that, given Qi's height, he would need to stand in the second or third row, and might fall from the rack and hurt other children as well. When Ms Zhang was laying out some photos with wooden frames in the resource classroom, she even murmured to herself: 'They can't touch these (the corners of the frames) ... Too dangerous'.



Figure 6.4 Missing the garden

The restriction of access to places also showed impacts on children's social lives with peers. Wu noted that everyone was busy studying by his/her own desk during breaks; thus it was impossible for him to socialise with other children. During the guided tour, Dan showed me the backyard behind the main school building. She liked going there with friends because they could carry out their 'adventures' or sit down to read books in the sunlight. However, they were not allowed to hang out there anymore, and her best friend Lulu also stopped joining their 'adventures' for fear of being spotted by teachers.

### *Seating plan in class*

Within a regular classroom, where children were seated could be crucial to their educational experiences. Half of the child participants were seated following the same principle as for other children – by height. Ting was seated at the front of the classroom not only because of her height, but also because the arrangement made it more convenient for teachers to check what she was doing and help her out.

Qi and Lulu were seated at the back of the classroom with no deskmates. Qi well remembered the changing of his seat and wished that he could sit at the front (his eyesight seemed to cause concern as sometimes he needed to wear glasses to read what was written on the blackboard). However, in some non-core subjects like ICT, Qi was allowed to sit at the front so teachers could easily respond to his questions. When asked why Lulu was seated at the back, Ms Shen said that Lulu often fell asleep when she could not understand the instructions, or sometimes walked out of her seat, which might interrupt other children's learning. Ms Shen felt that Lulu was fine with her current seat because she could now feel free to walk around. During the interview, Lulu revealed that she had asked to change her seat because she was bullied by her deskmate. Nevertheless, without any deskmate, she was often left alone during group learning. Rui was seated in a separate group, which made him feel lonely and bored. It was his class teacher Ms Dai's idea to discipline some pupils by isolating them from the rest.

In the participating schools, usually children were asked to work with peers nearby during group learning, and it was relatively uncommon for teachers to allow children to choose their own buddies. Thus whoever was sitting next to the child participants could often determine whether they were able to access group learning. Some pupils might be patient and friendly about engaging the child participants in groupwork. But there were also many pupils who ignored the child participants. In Lian's case, her deskmate (a boy) was seen to constantly tease and bully her in ways, such as taking her textbook away, that sometimes interfered with her learning and distressed her. The class teacher Ms Jun was aware of the issue and admitted that such an arrangement was not appropriate. Nevertheless, she felt that she had no choice because having Lian as a deskmate was seen as unfair to any other child.

## 6.3 Participation and collaboration

Collaboration is a prescribed condition for cultivating an inclusive community in which all members work together reciprocally towards a shared vision. In this section, I present findings on whether and how disabled children were learning together with their peers, and how teachers worked with each other and with the broader community. Given the research focus on pupil voice, I particularly examine how teachers could possibly learn with and from children.

### 6.3.1 Pupils learning with peers

No pupil could be a completely isolated and self-reliant learner in a classroom. When children are studying in the same space, the on-going learning inherently forms a collective experience for everyone. One of the fundamental assumptions in implementing inclusive education is to promote children's acceptance of each other's difference, so that they can explore ways of taking part in learning together.

#### *Learning together*

The child participants very much valued learning together with peers. They had a strong willingness to be present in lessons and activities with their classmates. They preferred lessons in which there were more opportunities for children to work with and help each other; pupils in the same group could actively engage disabled children in learning. They identified peers as one of the main sources of support when they needed extra help with schoolwork.

The child participants tended to see themselves as part of collective learning: it was not only about themselves participating in learning; it was more about every pupil joining in. For example, when I asked Xin why the things she liked at school were so good, she referred to some photos and commented: 'Hmm because this is the teacher giving us a lecture, and we are listening to her with full attention ... Then this is classmates helping each other (pair work) ... Hmm this is everyone doing work carefully.' Li also explained that the reason she liked her class teacher was that the teacher would make sure that 'everyone is being together'. When other pupils were creating distractions or making noise, the child participants also found it harder to



concentrate on their learning. Ning stressed as one of her wishes that pupils should not do anything irrelevant during lessons but should listen to teachers carefully.

I should note that in the participating schools, the extent to which pupils would have chances to work directly with each other was highly dependent on individual teachers' pedagogy. In some lessons, the teaching followed a traditional teacher-centred style. In other lessons, teachers might give pupils more time and space to work in pairs or groups; they would step back and only provide assistance when pupils needed it.

### *Marginalisation in group learning*

When pupils were left on their own to work in groups, disabled children could be readily marginalised or excluded. In a nature science lesson, when children were asked to pick their own group buddies, Li was left standing alone; no others wanted to include her in their groups. The teacher, seeing the situation, decided to assign her to a group with three boys. The teacher told the boys to take good care of Li. However, when they started working on the task, they only talked to each other, ignoring Li. Soon she quietly left and stood at a distance from the other pupils.

Marginalisation could also happen in a more subtle way, which was much harder for teachers to notice. For example, pupils might 'secretly' take over the child participants' chances to get their hands on the learning task. Once Ning had to wait until all the other group buddies had finished the task before she could get the tool to start. In PE lessons that I observed, Ting and Lian were not allowed by their group buddies to take part in the competition between groups, in activities such as racing. Sometimes other pupils directly told the child participants what they should do to complete the group task but without the necessary explanations or instructions.

It is notable that disabled children were not 'passive victims' all the time – they could also be the ones marginalising other pupils in group learning. For instance, in a PE lesson, Ning, who was very good at sports, refused to work with a girl who was seen as less competent. The teacher finally had to pair up with Ning, because no other pupils welcomed her into their groups. Similarly, in the resource classroom at Hongxing School, Wu and Rui refused to work with Lian because she was

considered ‘not bright enough’. Therefore, the issue of marginalisation in peer learning went beyond individual children’s hostility towards the child participants, but was based more on the overall school culture, in which children (with or without impairments) were likely to avoid working with peers who were perceived as ‘less able’.

### *The little teachers*

In order to make sure that disabled children could gain support from peers, class teachers, in line with SEGC recommendations, assigned some pupils as ‘little teachers’ (*Xiao Laoshi*) to support the child participants’ learning and other general matters. However, I found that children had mixed feelings about their peer supporters. Combining children’s interviews with my own observation in classrooms, I identified three types of peer supporters: the tutors, the carers and the controllers.

In most cases, peer supporters were assigned to support disabled children’s academic learning. Ting and Li had their peer supporters nominated by their class teachers to help with schoolwork. Both supporters had good academic performances (one of them was a class-level student cadre). Ting and Li welcomed the tutoring and teachers also felt that such a strategy was effective in helping to reduce their own workload. Nevertheless, apart from providing tutoring during lessons or after school, there was no other social interaction involved. The peer supporters would not become the child participants’ group buddies even if they were struggling to join a group. The supporters also did not socialise with them during breaks or intervene against bullying.

Peer supporters could also be asked to look after disabled children’s daily needs. For instance, Ms Cui asked the pupils sitting around Ting to keep an eye on her; thus when teachers were absent, these children would attend to Ting’s personal needs. They might ask her whether she needed to go to the toilet and accompany her there. When school finished, pupils would help Ting put everything back in her schoolbag. Again, these supporters did not engage the child participants in group learning and offered no shelter from bullying.

It is worth taking more space here to describe ‘the controllers’. These peer supporters, although they were asked by teachers to support disabled children, behaved differently depending on the teachers’ presence. Playing ‘two-faces’, these children’s ‘cleverness’ at gaining rewards from teachers and meanwhile exercising the power they were granted over fellow pupils was striking (e.g. Illustration 11).

First, since teachers prioritised these peer supporters as the source of support for the child participants, they became the gatekeepers who decided whether or not children could access help. Ning and Wu complained that when they went to their peer supporters for help, their requests could be dismissed if the supporters claimed to be busy with their own schoolwork. Ning also mentioned that her supporter even asked other children not to help her because the supporter assumed that Ning ‘wouldn’t know about the answer if they did not know’. However, the peer supporters did not consider whether the child participants did need help or whether the time was suitable and convenient. When the supporters wanted to ‘offer’ help, they would interrupt whatever the child participants were doing, and the latter felt obliged to obey the supporters’ requests.

Second, the peer supporters might also jeopardise disabled children’s chances to participate, in the name of ‘offering help’. Ning was not happy with a student cadre who sat next to her. For Ning, helping teachers to carry pupils’ workbooks was a very important responsibility, and she was angry that the peer supporter often took over the job without gaining her consent.

Third, in some extreme situations, the peer supporters even bullied disabled children. On one occasion during break, a student cadre approached Xin and asked to check her workbook. Xin being reluctant to do so, the girl suddenly grabbed the workbook and ran to the front of the classroom. Xin chased after her, but when Xin almost caught her, she dropped the workbook onto the floor and walked away. Xin picked up her workbook, looking very sad because some pages were bent.

Teachers felt that they had already been very cautious about choosing suitable pupils to be the supporters. Teachers emphasised individual children’s ‘good traits’; for example, Ms Ai said that she would only pick children who were reliable and

trustworthy. However, teachers admitted that sometimes they would just choose the pupils who did well in academic learning, even if these children were not that interested in helping peers.

Teachers often used rewards to encourage and motivate children to take up the role of peer supporter. Nevertheless, in some classes where teachers felt that a whole-class supportive culture should be fostered among all children, child participants like Dan and Lulu felt that their classmates were willing to help them out when needed, without any system of rewards or assignment of peer supporters.

### *Teachers supporting children's collaboration in learning*

What were teachers doing when disabled children were marginalised or excluded during group learning? First, teachers might be unable to pay enough attention to what was happening within each group, especially in a large class without teaching assistants. Second, teachers felt that not every pupil had to learn, as long as most of them were doing fine. Furthermore, some teachers, like Ms Ruan, found it hard to find group buddies for disabled children, because they believed that it was unfair for the buddies, who might not gain much in return, an attitude which reflected a restricted understanding of learning.

The evidence of disabled children enjoying and achieving group learning underlined teachers' important role in supporting children to work together. Illustration 2 gives a vivid example of how Sha participated in learning with her classmates.

Sha confirmed that in her group, everyone was given something to do. Roles were allocated by open discussion among all of them rather than being decided by only some children. I did observe that they took up different roles to contribute to a shared goal. Sha was not given the 'easiest' job, and they swapped what they were doing so that everyone learned different skills. In addition, the teacher explained what each group was meant to be working on. She attentively inspected each table to see how things were going and stepped in when necessary. When Sha's group needed more time to complete the task, the teacher subtly offered extra time. After the lesson, the excitement of learning was shared by all. I have never been more certain about what should be required in an inclusive classroom: it was not a waste of time for anyone;

what children and teachers were participating in together was something profoundly meaningful to all of us.

### Illustration 2: Light up a little bulb

This is a lesson in nature science. Children go to the lab and sit in groups of 4 around big tables. Today's objective is to learn how to assemble circulars to light up a little bulb. The teacher, who is young and often puts on a smile, says that pupils have got two minutes to complete the task. Some groups finish the task very soon and pupils report to teachers full of excitement. Sha and Xi\* are in the same group with two other boys. The boys leave the manual work to the girls, only watching and offering suggestions. It is not an easy task for them. Sha turns to another group asking for help, and a girl wearing '2 bars' comes over to help. Time is up and the teacher asks pupils to stop. However, Sha and Xi are still busy trying. The teacher looks at them but she does not say anything, such as asking them to hurry up, which may draw other children's attention to the group. The teacher simply continues to compliment the children on how great they have performed, while keeping an eye on Sha's group. Finally, their bulb is lit up! Seeing this, the teacher promptly announces that all pupils have succeeded at the task.

The following task is to re-light up the bulb and draw a picture of the circulars. The teacher hands out blank papers to each group and emphasises that all four members of a group should complete this task together. Sha's group struggles a bit but they get it done after a short while. Xi is in charge of drawing. The teacher asks another pupil to draw the correct one on the blackboard, and then gives pupils one minute to amend their drawings. Sha takes over the paper and continues to draw until she finishes. She is so thrilled. She jumps up and tells Xi and the other two boys: 'It's done!'

For the third task, children are given two little bulbs and asked to figure out different ways of connecting the circulars. Xi firstly works on it before handing things over to a boy, and he continues. They successfully light up two bulbs and they are laughing together so happily. It is a moment to celebrate achievement! Then Sha starts drawing. Now the lesson is nearing the end and everything quiets down. Sha and Xi lay their heads on the table, staring at the two shining little bulbs, with brightened eyes.

\* Xi is also an LRC-designated pupil with learning difficulties.

### 6.3.2 Teachers learning with and from pupils

The collaboration between teachers and pupils is given much less attention, while collaboration among teachers and parents might be mentioned frequently. Could

teachers benefit from learning with and from children? Did teachers listen to children and were their educational decisions informed by knowledge of children's views?

### *Learning with pupils*

In the participating schools, teachers were seldom seen learning with pupils. For example, there were no interest clubs open to both teachers and pupils which offered the space for them to learn together. Often, when pupils asked questions or pointed out problems with teachers' instructions, teachers dismissed these comments and tried to get on with what ought to be taught in the standard curriculum. The approach of teaching-to-test prevailed, with little time and space given to children's creativity, and teachers seldom engaged in discussion with pupils during lessons. Moreover, the busy rhythm of schooling also limits the likelihood of teachers spending time with pupils. Sha noted that although she liked her English teacher the most because the teacher would join pupils to do rope skipping together, the teacher sometimes had to do marking instead, so she would not go and bother the teachers because they looked too busy.

Nonetheless, there were a few teachers who did not hesitate to show that there could be things that they did not know much about, ideas that they might get wrong or tasks that they could not do well themselves. In front of pupils, they presented themselves as learners too. For example, in a PE lesson for Dan and Lulu, the teacher admitted that given his age he would not be able to demonstrate a task twice. In the resource classroom in Mingzhu School, Ms Zhang tried to do a wrist turning trick together with pupils and acknowledged that it was indeed very hard to accomplish. When a child managed to do it, Ms Zhang did not hold back her genuine compliments.

### *Consulting and learning from pupils*

Many teachers noted that although they would now and then consult pupils on how they felt about their learning progress, the amount or difficulty of homework, or teachers' teaching practices, they rarely engaged with disabled children. On the one hand, teachers felt that these children had inherent limitations in formulating and expressing feelings and thoughts; thus the reliability of their views was questioned.

On the other hand, teachers felt unsure of how to communicate with disabled children, so they chose withdrawal to avoid making any mistakes. For instance, Ms Qian worried that Wu might realise that he was ‘special’ if she asked him to comment on the schooling provision. After all, according to teachers, they were too busy to really attend to pupils’ views and experiences.

Nevertheless, the lack of direct consultation with child participants did not mean that their voices were not acted upon. Many teachers emphasised that these children’s individual interests and preferences should be respected, and they would adjust their practices accordingly, for example by using multimedia in classroom teaching to engage them better. Also, as mentioned before (section 6.2.2), when class teachers such as Ms Ai negotiated the timetabling of resource lessons, they took children’s views into consideration.

Interestingly, teachers who facilitated more inclusive classroom practice, such as Ms Shen and Ms Ai, asserted that consulting pupils had never been any extra burden to them, because such a strategy was almost naturally embedded in their everyday actions, and came to be expected by children too – ‘Everyone knows it’ as pointed out by Ms Shen. These teachers were confident that they had a good grasp of children’s experiences and were therefore able to get their decisions right even if they did not directly interrogate children. What were these teachers’ strategies for learning about pupils? Ms Shen referred to the importance of ‘observation’: from a stepped back position, teachers should observe the pupils closely and attentively whenever possible, to get to know the children’s worlds better.

Teachers could learn much from their experiences of having disabled children in their classrooms. Ms Shen expressed her deep gratitude for her pupils who taught her a lot. At first, she was also worried about her pupils’ abilities. Exploring ways of making sense of the curriculum helped her improve her teaching tremendously. She was proud that her pupils were able to use what they had learned before to solve new problems, rather than simply memorising the correct answers. At a personal level, she was touched by how children supported each other and helped her out too. She started to realise that there were many other things that were worth learning about living together, beyond academic learning. When pupils pointed out what she could

do to make things better, she did not feel defensive about her authority but genuinely appreciated children's help in making her work so much easier. She asserted that, by respecting children's voices and trusting them to be accountable for their own lives, she had made pupils more motivated to participate in learning: 'Because what you do will make them happy, and you are doing this, as a result, they will put more effort into their schoolwork.' Although she did have high expectations of pupils' academic achievements, she felt that the two agendas of inclusion and achievement were not contradictory but could be realised at the same time.

The phenomenon of learning from pupils was also reflected in a change of general attitudes towards disabled children. Ms Zhang and Ms Zhao, after becoming resource teachers, developed greater empathy for the circumstances faced by these children and their families. Ms Zhao recalled such an experience:

It was until this semester after I started to teach these special children, I became, every time when I was home after school, I would tell my family that these children's parents were indeed living a difficult life. They really are. It feels like, when I am looking at these children, in my heart I have some kind of, some affection that is different from before.

(Interviews, Ms Zhao, resource teacher)

### 6.3.3 Teachers working with each other

In the participating schools, teachers of the core subjects in the same year shared offices, which made it convenient to communicate with each other. There were regular meetings for teachers of the same subject to discuss lesson plans and teaching strategies. Also teachers had opportunities to observe each other's lessons across the years, subjects and schools. These activities, called 'lesson study' (*Jiaoyan*), were already in place as compulsory for teachers' professional development in Chinese schools. Teachers generally found such activities helpful because they facilitated collaboration among teachers, granting them the chance to learn about others' classroom practices and reflect on their own practices as a result. Nevertheless, teachers sometimes complained that too many of these activities could actually consume their free periods, which in turn could have negative impacts, such as interrupting teaching schedules or adding to the workload.



The teacher participants generally felt that they had been working well with other teachers without severe conflicts. However, the implementation of LRC policy and the introduction of resource teachers and resource lessons shifted the dynamics in schools: some previous regular teachers became special educators. Resource teachers were chosen for being a suitable match with disabled children: that is, being kind, patient or less demanding in regard to children's academic performance. Ms Zhang was chosen also for her capacity to coordinate. It is necessary to examine how regular teachers worked with resource teachers, because disabled children's school experiences could be influenced by that collaboration.

In Mingzhu School, Ms Zhang invited regular teachers to teach as volunteers (with bonus) in the resource classroom. She had few difficulties in getting teachers to agree to the work, but the quality of such voluntary teaching was far from being consistent or systematic. Some regular teachers did not prepare their teaching well or sometimes simply forgot the time. The children often did not have a clear idea of what was going to happen in their resource lessons. Ms Zhang revealed that she had to deal with regular teachers' pressure to add more hours to the resource lessons, and it was really hard to seek other teachers' cooperation on administrative work.

In Yulan School, Ms Zhao performed mainly as a tutor. She would consult regular teachers about which stage the children were at and shape her lesson plans accordingly. She would try to integrate several subjects together in her resource lessons, which children found helpful. The special education coordinator in the school was in charge of all the administrative work.

Much tension was seen between regular teachers and the resource teacher in Hongxing School. Ms Guan stepped down from a senior management position because of her disagreement with the school's excessive focus on academic performance. She had a passion for education and had helped out numerous pupils who were at risk of exclusion. Because of her stance, she often had to confront other teachers. Taking up the role of resource teacher, she believed that she was the only person who could provide quality education for LRC pupils, and that regular teachers were not fully committed to these children. By contrast with other resource teachers who left what was happening in regular classrooms alone, Ms Guan also tried to

intervene with regular teachers' classroom practices. For example, drawing on the principles of behaviourism, she stipulated how many times per lesson regular teachers should check up on LRC pupils. The task was as specific as 'making eye contact 3 times', and children would be given rewards if they achieved the targets. Ms Qian would go to Ms Guan to ask for advice, which she found helpful. However, Ms Guan did not allow regular teachers to intervene with her teaching in resource lessons. Once, when Ms Ai asked Ms Guan if she could help with Ning's essay, Ms Guan turned down the request because she believed that teaching the regular curriculum was irrelevant. Regular teachers pointed out that they did not really know what was being taught in the resource classroom, and suspected that it might be something related to psychological counselling. The child participants from the school were reluctant to attend resource lessons. Ning seemed to be stuck in the tension between teachers (Illustration 3).

#### Illustration 3: A liar

There was one time when Ning skipped her resource lesson. Ms Guan went upstairs and found her in the regular classroom. She said to Ning in the corridor that Ning had let her down, given all her investment in Ning. She said that Ning was a liar and a braggart. After learning of this, Ms Ai felt that it was not at all fair for Ms Guan to make such comments about her pupil. She could totally understand Ning's action because Ning really liked the handcraft skill interest club. However, to avoid further confrontation with Ms Guan, Ms Ai talked to Ning: 'Don't behave like this again. If you don't want to go, try to talk with Ms Guan rather than bragging.' She consoled Ning that even if she could not attend the club anymore, she should continue to finish her work. Later Ning told me that if she could finish her work – a cross-stitch of flowers – by the end of the term, she would like to give it to Ms Ai as a gift.

Resource teachers also tended to experience tensions with other special education colleagues. Ms Zhang and Ms Guan felt that they were doing almost all the work related to the implementation of LRC. Ms Zhang saw a threat that the special education coordinator might easily take credit for her work. Ms Guan was disappointed that the coordinator stood in line with other regular teachers, which she regarded as impeding the advocacy for special education. She also mentioned that the unsupportive deputy headteacher had failed to be a role model for other teachers:

Out of all the teachers in the school, only this deputy headteacher did not submit his handbook in time. He did nothing. What is he supposed to write? He handed in at the last minute. He copied something online and he even forgot to change the pupil's name.

(Interviews, Ms Guan, resource teacher)

### 6.3.4 Teachers working with communities

In Chinese schools, families were highly involved in supporting children's learning. For example, most homework needed to be checked and signed by parents before being handed in to teachers. Sometimes, parents and children were required to complete the homework together. Families were also expected to help with children's preparation for lessons and revision before exams. They were constantly informed about children's performance and behaviour at school.

All child participants expressed their closeness with their families, who helped a lot with their academic learning. Qi's mother would find sample essays online for him to read. Some parents used home tutors or sent children to weekend lessons/clubs. Dan's mother helped to organise a party at home to enable her to invite classmates over. Children saw themselves as members of their families. As noted before, Lulu dropped out of a school trip to spare her parents expense. They also cherished the opportunities to spend time with their families. Qi wanted to share everything that happened at school with his mother. He asked for a photo of him mimicking 'Big Bear' in the resource classroom because he wanted to show it to his mother.

It should be noted that teachers like Ms Shen and Ms Ai never blamed children's families for difficulties in learning. Instead, they underlined their own role in children's lives. They believed that, as teachers, they should strive to make a big difference for children living in challenging situations. Two teachers particularly emphasised the importance of working with families. Ms Cui felt that she was in debt to Ting's family because they had offered incredible support with the child's learning. Ting managed to finish all the homework the same as the other pupils. Ms Cui was also grateful to another kind-hearted family living in the same neighbourhood as Ting for providing after-school tutoring. Ms Cui communicated with Ting's family quite often either formally or informally. Ms Ai also felt it

essential to engage with Ning's family because 'everyone has to be in it' for the child. She kept encouraging the family:

There was once, when she (Ning) was in Year 1 or 2, we handed out exam papers and asked parents to leave a message. Her father wrote down these words: 'Our child is stupid.' I called her family on the next day and asked them to come over to the school. I told him: 'Yes, after all, this is your child. But even for me, I felt really sad when I saw this. You see. I have not even given up on her. She might be slow at learning. But if you give up, it is all going to end.'

(Interviews, Ms Ai, class teacher)

However, there were also teachers who felt that parents should take the main responsibility for educating children, underplaying the impact of the school. Teachers attributed children's disabilities to parents' faults, for example, to a mother coming from outside Shanghai (*Wailaimai*). Ms Xia and Ms Jia even understood parents' motivation in accepting the LRC designation as stemming from the financial benefits. The relationship between Ms Xia and Qi's family in particular kept falling apart. Although Qi was very close to his mother, the class teacher Ms Xia did not hesitate to blame his mother in front of him. His parents were also asked to pay a price for his behaviour at school (Illustration 4).

Finally, teachers reflected that there was a lack of support from the LEA. Teachers were not well informed about what was expected of them. For example, most teachers were not familiar with the medical disability labels. Without sufficient training, they relied on the Internet for relevant information. The special education coordinator in Wenyuan School could not tell the difference between labels such as ADHD and Learning Difficulties. Teachers also felt that there was no guidance for their classroom practice. What should regular teachers do when they have disabled children in the classroom? What should resource teachers do after a huge investment was made to open resource classrooms? Teachers hoped that the touring guidance teacher could visit schools more often to answer their questions, though this was indeed unrealistic given that there was only one touring teacher for the whole jurisdiction. The resource teachers, Ms Zhang and Ms Guan, were attending a training programme. They felt that the theories offered in the course were somehow disconnected from the school realities they lived with. They wished that there could

be guidance that encompassed teachers' everyday situations, so as to better inform their practices.

#### Illustration 4: Punishing the parents

Before the interview with Ms Zhang starts, she tells me about what just happened to Qi several days ago. The toilet of the school was jammed. Teachers found that it was jammed after Qi locked himself in a toilet room. So teachers questioned Qi and learned that he had thrown something into the toilet. The school decided to not let cleaners do the job. Instead, Qi's parents were called in to clean the toilet, in front of other teachers and pupils. I am a bit shocked at hearing this. I can imagine how humiliating this could be for Qi and his parents. Isn't there any other better way to deal with this rather than making a child feel ashamed by punishing his parents?

### 6.4 Participation and achievement

I have stressed that the conceptualisation and implementation of inclusive education should not risk being solely concerned with 'social inclusion', without concern for learning and achievement. In this research, the notion of achievement is used in a broader sense than academic attainment, recognising the limitations of measurements and assessments (e.g. exams in schools) for evaluating children's progress in learning. During fieldwork, I paid attention to whether the child participants were participating in learning and gaining a sense of achievement in what they could accomplish. I also explored what was helping them to learn and what were seen as barriers, and the underpinning interactions, policies and practices that shaped their experiences.

#### 6.4.1 Children's learning

In this section, I will illustrate how the child participants understood, experienced and negotiated their learning and achievement in regular schools.

##### *Attainment*

All child participants revealed their struggle with their academic attainments, namely the exam results. Of the 11 child participants, only Ting and Rui were able to pass exams all the time, and they could gain high levels of attainment in certain subjects.

It was not rare for the rest to fail the exams at school, and the children were aware that they were among the least well-performing pupils. Occasionally they could keep up with the curriculum in a few subjects, and reciprocally they tended to like the lessons in these subjects better and make more effort with them. Nevertheless, all children felt that they could complete the homework, usually with help from their families.

As mentioned before in section 6.2.3, pupils' academic performance in core subjects was overly emphasised by the schools, even acting as preconditions for pupils to access other extra-curricular activities. Achievements in non-core subjects and other areas were given much less recognition, a situation which affected the child participants who often encountered difficulties in academic learning of the core subjects, but could be good at many other things such as sports, handicrafts or social competence. The child participants welcomed and desired a diversity of subjects, which could be important through making the experience of achievement available to them.

### *Aspirations*

The child participants' aspirations and expectations for their future and their years of growing up echoed their present experiences at school. Most of them had few ideas about the transition into adulthood, assuming that everything would stay the same after they left school – consisting of homework and play. Only Sha, Dan and Lulu felt that they would need to work at vocational jobs like their parents. Interestingly, Sha wanted to become a primary school teacher. She explained her reasons as follows: first, a teacher was able to yell at bad pupils, and, only coming second, a teacher could help pupils to learn about things. Dan said that she would like to become a police officer or a servicewoman in the navy. She had already started to learn swimming with the support of her mother, because she recognised it as an essential skill for joining the navy. Lulu strongly felt that she did not want to relive her mother's life, running a shop and having to argue with difficult customers. She was thinking of working in her auntie's business instead. Given the existing job requirements, these children might be disappointed to find that their dreams were

very unlikely to come true. The illustration below shows how Dan and Lulu made sense of their choices of secondary school (Illustration 5).

#### Illustration 5: Going to the dream school

Dan and Lulu, instead of joining the rest of the class for games, are standing on the side. Dan asks Lulu which secondary school she wants to apply for. Lulu says: 'Starlight Secondary School'. That makes Dan laugh, and she says: 'I bet you won't be able to do it. You have to get 200 points. But your results for all the subjects do not even sum up to 100'. Lulu looks a little bit angry. She says that she must go there because her cousin is also studying in that school. Then they suddenly turn to me: 'Miss, why didn't you go to Harvard University?' I shrug my shoulders: 'I wouldn't pass.' 'You should give it a try!' says Lulu. Dan smiles and speaks in a cheerful tone: 'You have got to believe in miracles!'

Soon they go back to their little chat. I find myself slightly touched by their optimistic encouragement, though it could be easily seen as 'being naive' from an adult's point of view. We all face our 'limitations': they couldn't go to their dream secondary schools and I also couldn't choose institutions freely. They feel that they should study harder. But will that really help?

#### *Children's experiences of learning*

All the child participants identified lessons that they enjoyed doing at school and teachers they loved. For them, learning seemed to be a holistic experience: they rarely looked separately at a teacher's attitudes towards them, teaching practices or what subject was taught. Thus when a child felt that s/he liked a certain teacher, s/he would also pick the subject taught by that teacher as one of the favourites. Children's comments were consistent with my field observation.

Children pointed out several issues that could help or hinder their learning. They mostly acknowledged their own responsibility for learning: they felt that they could work harder or concentrate more during lessons. Recognising such factors, they often mentioned how other people could influence their learning in classrooms. Teachers who yelled at pupils were unlikeable. If other pupils were not listening carefully to what teachers were saying, the child participants also could feel very distracted. They did like group learning when other pupils offered them support. It was hoped that all pupils could have more time to take a rest, rather than doing schoolwork all the time when they were at school.

None of the child participants overly blamed teachers, and they offered their comments in a respectful and sympathetic way. In particular, children highlighted teachers' inclusive practice of engaging everyone in learning. For example, Lulu argued that teachers' practice could make a huge difference to her learning, even if two individual teachers appeared to be using the same strategy. In her English lesson, although the teacher asked all pupils to practise a dialogue one by one, a strategy called 'driving a small car', she stopped when it should have been Lulu's turn, and did not ask Lulu to take part. Later in that lesson, Lulu fell asleep and other children turned their heads to laugh at her. Lulu told me that she really missed her previous English teacher, who would make sure that everyone was involved, saying 'We all need to read it'. She said that this could help her to keep focused on learning.

Children also mentioned other facets of teachers' good practice, such as providing more opportunities for pupils to work together, recognising and rewarding achievements, being responsive to their questions or requests, using humor to make lessons more interesting, and rejecting punishment of pupils. No child asked for any special attention from teachers or extra provision for him/herself. These wishes could be widely shared by all other children too.

### *Fluid learner identities*

I observed that the child participants showed contrasting learner identities across different settings. In the lessons they liked, children tended to be more engaged and participate actively. For instance, they would try hard to solve the learning tasks, put up their hands to ask or answer teachers' questions, and concentrate on teachers' instructions even if other pupils were distracted. They acted rather differently in the lessons that they did not like that much. Also in these lessons, teachers rarely engaged them in learning, and could be more critical of these children's behaviours – criticising or undermining them in front of other pupils.

The child participant Qi could be an example here. Referring to his class teacher's rationale for excluding him from extra-curricular activities, he said 'The teacher does not let me participate. I cannot sing either. I cannot do anything either. Cannot do anything', and was often seen to withdraw from classroom learning. However, he



was transformed into a rather different type of learner in the interest club that I observed: he sat at the front of the classroom (allowed by the teacher); he kept asking questions about the screened film (the teacher listened and responded to him patiently and friendly); and he later assisted the teacher and answered other pupils' questions.

In spite of children's fluid identities when becoming competent learners in some settings, they revealed their general disbelief and lack of confidence in their abilities. They were aware of and somehow internalised teachers' low expectations of them. For example, Ning felt frustrated when her recent exam result was not noticed or recognised by the teacher because it must have been assumed that she would just get a borderline pass:

Ning: ... Like this time, the exam, I got 75 (out of 100). Then the English teacher asked the pupils who failed the exam (<60) to stand up. There were two. I did not fail. I did not stand up. Ms Ai said, hmm, she had said it last time that you (addressing the two pupils) would always fail. Then she said that you failed, how couldn't you just pass for one time? She said so.

Yuchen: But you did quite well, right?

Ning: Yes. The teacher said nothing. But the teacher just did not know about my score. Then she thought I passed. She thought I was 61, not 60.

Yuchen: You have got 75.

Ning: Yes, she did not know that.

(Interviews, Ning, child participant)

### *The negative impacts of disability labels*

Teachers acknowledged to me that they were likely to lower the standards for LRC disabled children's academic learning following the designation of LRC. The disability label itself was extremely influential in shaping teachers' perceptions of a child, as reflected by Ms Dai:

If you don't tell me that he is a LRC pupil, maybe I will just teach him like a normal kid. But since you have said so, I have to pay attention and look into him more. Then the more I looked at him, the more I felt that ... he was not quite normal. But overall, if you did not tell me that we had got such a child, I would feel that everything was alright – he had no problems at all.

(Interviews, Ms Dai, class teacher)

With the labelling, the medical discourse of disability was introduced to teachers. Before, they had only assumed that some children learned at a different pace and required further support, but after the designation, they started formulating a belief that there were inherent limitations to the learning these children could achieve, regardless of the support that a teacher could provide. Thus, children's educational difficulties and learning potential were seen as fixed and unchangeable. In the absence of a social and interactive understanding of disability, teachers also tended to underestimate their role in the child participants' learning.

I am not denying that certain realistic adjustments need to be made to the curriculum goals for the child participants. Nonetheless, the crucial issue is that disabled children were further differentiated from other under-performing pupils who did not carry disability labels. Yet the latter still deserved teachers' efforts to realise their learning potential and improve their academic performance.

Teachers often made adjustments to the assignments and the allocation of learning tasks for the child participants. The children were asked to skip challenging exercises or questions in their workbooks and usually they were given less homework than their peers. Teachers also adopted loose criteria in marking the child participants' schoolwork, as described by Ms Xia:

I told him (Qi) that I would not judge him by the standard for other pupils. I said to him that as long as he did the homework, I would give him a star and I would write him a 'good'. For English learning, I told him that he had to hand in his homework. However, sometimes, when he only finished the copying and did not do the dictation, I would not criticise him. Hmm, because I think that is beyond his ability. He has already tried to finish the simple stuff in our exam papers and exercise books. Then it is normal to leave something there. I would not pick on him because of that.

(Interviews, Ms Xia, class teacher)

Teachers' assumptions of disabled children's incompetence were also reflected in their everyday teaching practices. For example, the child participants were usually given 'too easy' tasks, which did not match what they could achieve. In the resource classroom at Mingzhu School, Ms Zhang asked LRC pupils to do a set of finger gymnastics at the beginning of every resource lesson, which was as simple as moving one's fingers to the background music. Pupils could tell from the title that it was designed for young children. Teachers' assumptions could also be conveyed more subtly. For instance, they often praised the child participants in comparison to other pupils, as if disabled children were supposed to be the least capable ones in a classroom (Illustration 6)<sup>40</sup>.

#### Illustration 6: The least competent pupil

The teacher asks pupils to draw an equilateral triangle by using a compass and a ruler. He has already provided a demonstration. He asks pupils to follow the instruction. Wu soon finishes drawing and turns to the boy sitting at the left to teach him how to draw the triangle. The girl sitting behind the boy comes over and asks Wu to go back to his own seat. He moves back but later he goes to help the boy again. The teacher says: 'I think some of you have been telling lies. You ask for labor skill lessons everyday. When I really do it, your craft skills are so poor.' Wu soon finishes another one and he puts the pencil down. The teacher notices him and assumes that Wu refuses to do the task. He asks the pupils sitting near to Wu: 'He didn't draw?' The boy who was helped by Wu replies: 'He did, and he has finished it.' Pupils gather around to see Wu's drawing and start to make sounds out of admiration: 'Wow! Wow!' The teacher comes over and checks his work, then he says to the whole class: 'Look at you all! You are not even better than Wu. His drawing is as good as mine!'

Although in this research I did not explore the intersectionality between gender and disability, observations from the fieldwork did suggest a gender bias in teachers' expectations of children's achievement: it was more important for boys to acquire essential skills for future independent living. In one resource lesson in Mingzhu School, Ms Ding paid more attention to Qi than to the girls from her own class, and when Qi was reluctant to participate, she said to him: 'You are a boy. You must be able to do better than those two girls.' Ms Zhang and Ms Xia made similar comments

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<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, this teacher also positioned his demonstration as the 'best' work, which could not be surpassed by any of the pupils.

on Sha and Ning: that they did not really have to learn at school, because they were good-looking so everything would be fine after they got married.

#### 6.4.2 The performative school culture

In the participating schools, teachers frequently mentioned the prevailing high pressure on children and teachers to produce better academic results. Setting high standards for pupils' academic learning might make teachers more committed to every child's learning. However, the increasing competition among classes and schools seemed to have pushed teachers and pupils far away from maintaining a healthy socio-emotional schooling environment.

Scholars in China also frequently warned of the huge sacrifice of children's happiness to the international fame gained from educational performances. During my fieldwork, I was overwhelmed and felt suffocated by the currently intense and demanding school lives. The rhythm in schools was very much like that of a factory for the mass production of impressive numbers yielded by exams. During my last visit to Wenyuan School, where, according to Ms Shen, the headteacher was not implementing a high-pressure performance agenda, I found myself almost tearful at seeing children playing together in the playground before the day started. There was a compelling sense of joy and freedom which was already largely missing. Ms Shen commented that Wenyuan School was still a 'real' school, while in some other schools 'everyone is suffering – teachers and pupils'.

The workload for teachers and pupils was heavy even at primary level. The curriculum was narrowed in the service of the core subjects. Pupils had to finish a large amount of homework, partly within school hours and the rest after school. If a pupil failed to complete what was required during the day, s/he would often be asked to stay late to finish it. Thus every day there were many parents waiting at the school gates to pick up their children; sometimes they had to stand there for nearly one hour till their children were 'released'. Not surprisingly, children learned that they had to make use of their free time to finish schoolwork, so that they could go home on time. They chose to write homework during breaks, which, as mentioned before, limited children's chances to socialise with each other at school.

With the ‘good intention’ of pushing children to work harder, teachers often caused distress to pupils for their unsatisfying performances. In the scenario below (Illustration 7), Qi opted out in a maths lesson, which prompts the question: what do we expect children to participate in anyway?

#### Illustration 7: Disengaged from classroom learning

The maths teacher writes down three questions on the blackboard ... he calls a boy to come to the front to solve one of the problems. The boy hesitates when he is about to start writing down the first step. Immediately pupils start to shout: ‘He doesn’t know how to do it!’ The teacher watches him writing down a number, saying: ‘He can do this.’ Two other pupils at the front have finished solving their questions, so they are back in their seats. The boy is still standing there and it seems that he does not know what to do. The teacher leans towards the podium and turns his head back to remind the boy: ‘What does it equal to if you do the minus first?’ The boy stares at the teacher. The teacher then starts to tell him off: ‘Can you do it or not? I am asking you.’ His voice gets louder and louder. The boy just stays quiet, as if he is totally in a panic. The teacher asks him to restart, asking why he completed the homework and now fails to do the same thing. Some pupils are telling him what to do, but some others are laughing at him: ‘It must be his mom teaching him!’ The boy blushes. It gets very noisy in the classroom with pupils and the teacher putting the boy on the spot. However, Qi seems to be not bothered at all – he keeps writing his English workbook.

Teachers felt that because they had to raise other pupils’ academic performances for the league tables, sacrificing the child participants’ learning was a compromise that they could not bypass. They argued that, once designated, disabled children should be kept away from the high academic pressure in schools, and that, if academic requirements for these children were lowered, they would gain significant emotional benefits as a result. The headteacher from Wenyuan School noted that within such a competitive education system, only LRC pupils were entitled to a happy childhood while other pupils were doomed to live with academic stress:

When we, our generation, were young, the curriculum was very easy. Thus you could not tell who was stupid or not. The recent problems are only generated by the current education system. However, the so-called ‘happy education’ (*Yukuai Jiaoyu*) has only been relevant for these children (LRC pupils).

(Fieldnotes, 12/11/2013)

Teachers stressed the importance of keeping the child participants emotionally healthy, for example by avoiding upsetting them over matters of learning. For example, when pupils failed to complete certain learning tasks, teachers often criticised non-LRC pupils for not doing things right or perfectly, while reassuring the child participants that it was totally fine for them to make mistakes. Teachers tended to adopt a more supportive teaching style consisting of reassurance, encouragement and praise, in order to keep these children relaxed and tension-free. Ms Ding said that she would compliment Sha for any slight progress she made, to keep the child happy and confident. Ms Cui regretted the one time when she lost patience with Ting's misunderstanding of her instruction:

Finally, I yelled at her, saying that you could not even understand this. Then I asked her to do it again. Twice. Three times. She started to cry when she was doing that. Then I suddenly felt sorry when I saw her tears. I should not do this. How could I blame her?

(Interviews, Ms Cui, class teacher)

Ms Ai described how Ning had become happier after the designation, when she stopped pressuring her about academic performance:

At that time, she was not tested. So we had the same standard for her as for other pupils. There was a lot of homework to do. She was very tired and miserable. She did not feel happy. The parents were also suffering. After the designation, we reduced the learning tasks for her. Then she slowly turned back into what she was like before.

(Interviews, Ms Ai, class teacher)

It is noticeable that the emotional benefits could be mutual for teachers and pupils. Ms Qian compared her interactions with Wu and with other pupils. She felt that when the teacher-pupil talk was not purely instrumental, for the sake of enhancing pupils' academic performance, she was able to understand Wu's world better and also experienced a connection with the child at a deeper personal level:

So sometimes, if I am chatting with him (Wu), it also means that I am feeling happy too. When I am chatting with other pupils, it is always about how you are getting on with your study. To tell you the truth, I have never had deep conversations with other pupils. I rarely talked with other pupils, like what's going on at your home. But I am very close to Wu. Maybe because I have talked a lot with him, we became close. I like chatting with him. When it comes to other pupils, it is always about stuff like study, study and study. I mean, as teachers, we would not feel much happiness in the heart if we keep doing this. I am more relaxed when I am talking with Wu. We can talk about everything and he can say anything. Anyway, it is very relaxing.

(Interviews, Ms Qian, class teacher)

Only in a schooling culture driven by academic performance could it become, oddly, inconsistent with learning to make children happy at school. Ironically, teachers even justified their exclusionary practices by referring to children's emotional wellbeing within a child-centred discourse: if it fits children's needs, then teachers are doing the right thing (Devine, 2003). For instance, Ms Xia said that usually she would not approach Qi because 'he would feel very happy if teachers ignore him'. Also, in Mingzhu School, teachers reached a consensus that the existence of the resource classroom was beneficial for LRC pupils' emotional health at school, as described by Ms Ding:

I think for these special educational needs children, a resource classroom indeed has given them a happy land, right? It's the same. Because in this land, they can find their own, that kind of happiness which belongs to them, right? Sometimes when they are ... staying in the regular classrooms, she (Sha) would feel too much pressure to receive the same education with her peers, right? Because the standard is for ordinary people. They cannot take the requirements for normal kids ... In the regular classrooms, they often, like they have such poker faces. Except sometimes that I gave her some praise, she would feel satisfied then she would be like, she would put a smile on her face. When they come to the resource classroom, oh, all of these pupils are feeling so happy ... I think, for the kind of children like her, it is beneficial. So I don't think there is any issue here. None.

(Interviews, Ms Ding, class teacher)

In some ways, the resource classroom did provide a relaxing space for the child participants. Many of them liked the element of 'playing' in resource lessons. However, children would still feel concerned about whether resource lessons could help their academic learning. Sha expressed her feeling that, although she was having a good time in the resource classroom, the resource lessons were not helpful for her

academic learning. Indeed, no matter how hard teachers tried to construct the space of the resource classroom as an isolated utopian world for disabled children, it did not exist in a vacuum: the beliefs prevailing in regular classrooms could still permeate the resource classrooms. In the ‘happy land’ of Mingzhu School, Qi was criticised by an English teacher who came to help as a volunteer (Illustration 8).

#### Illustration 8: Just moody

Sha and another girl have finished practising a dialogue in English, so they go to play at the back. The English teacher, who comes to the resource classroom today to assist teaching, asks Qi to practise with her. After hearing the teacher saying several sentences, Qi refuses to continue, saying: ‘I don’t feel like talking’. Ms Zhang asks him why. Qi points to the English teacher: ‘She said so many sentences! It’s too long!’ Ms Zhang is angry at his gesture, which is seen as very impolite in China. She asks Qi to stand up and starts telling him off. The English teacher also says to him: ‘Even he (the autistic boy in the same resource classroom) has done it, how wouldn’t you do it?’ Ms Zhang mimics his gesture, asking: ‘Have you respected others? Have you respected teachers?’ Qi looks quite upset. He remains silent. Ms Zhang turns to the English teacher: ‘He is not alright today. Moody. He has never been like this before.’ Ms Zhang then turns to me, seeking my testimony. I realise that Ms Zhang is actually helping Qi to get away from the English teacher’s further criticism. So I echo that he is not quite himself today. Following Ms Zhang’s request, Qi apologises to the English teacher but then starts to cry: ‘If only she did not say that long dialogue, I would be able to speak’. The English teacher turns her head and says to Ms Zhang: ‘This one is really stupid.’ Ms Zhang explains again that he is not usually like this.

Nevertheless, the child participants were not informed that their academic performances were no longer ‘important’. Therefore, they felt the same as other pupils subjected to high academic pressure. They also spent a lot of time completing the schoolwork. Most of them had to cope with the constant frustration of failing exams and the shortage of support for their learning. Some of them gave up their time for playing and socialising. For instance, Ting studied until 11pm every day and spent weekends having extra private tutoring. Although she managed to do well in exams, Ms Zhao was concerned that Ting had spent too much time doing homework and as a result had insufficient time for social and leisure activities. She recommended Ting to watch a popular children’s TV programme about fathers taking their children on trips, but was disappointed when Ting only managed to



watch one episode, which she liked a lot. From that weekend on, Ting again spent all her time studying.

### 6.4.3 Teachers' inclusive practice

But along with the marginalisation of disabled children's learning, I still felt optimistic when seeing that there were teachers who kept trying to negotiate and promote all children's learning and participation. It is my intention to gain implications from this research with which to improve the provision. Thus it is worth reserving more space for examining these teachers' 'differences' in practice in the light of what they know, what they believe and what they do (Rouse, 2008).

The child participants' constructions of 'good' teachers and 'good' practice could illuminate what schools should strive for. As noted already, the essential criterion was whether every child was included in what was going on in classrooms. The child participants did not want to be left out on the excuse of their low competence or need of protection, but wanted to be trusted by teachers to explore and participate. They liked teachers who were fair and respectful to all pupils, as well as approachable and supportive when they needed help. Teachers should have high expectations of children's learning, but should not distress or criticise children too much for their performance or behaviour. Children seemed to have better relationships with the teachers who could understand their experiences. Children's comments reaffirmed the consistency between what pupils desired from teachers and what committed inclusive teachers were trying to achieve through their daily practice. Parallels were noticeable between Chinese inclusive classroom practices and the conceptualisation of 'inclusive pedagogy' as in Florian (2014).

It needs to be clarified that the teachers described in the following paragraphs also faced many other kinds of challenges and demands; they were not 'perfect' – doing everything right all the time. Their practices were also enacted in specific schooling contexts with varied school policies and structures. This research does not mainly aim at an in-depth analysis of teachers' inclusive practices. However, these teachers brought the 'hope' of a transformed future, because they demonstrated that with certain principles underlying their practice, they were more likely to open up the

space for all children to learn and participate, and thus facilitate a better school experience for everyone.

The most essential starting point for teachers was to have the commitment and determination to promote every pupil's learning and participation, regardless of the challenges involved in such a process, which was inherently moral. Teachers tried not to marginalise certain children in their classrooms, but kept negotiating the inclusion of all children. They recognised the process as one of trial-and-error entailing flexibility in decision-making, rather than a static condition that could be readily reached. In other words, if one strategy did not work, they would try other ways; the main thing was to not stop exploring in any circumstances. In terms of classroom teaching, aligned with children's comments, it was almost compulsory for these teachers to engage every child in learning. It was considered unacceptable to exclude some children, because classroom learning should be a collective experience shared by all, and the disengagement of some children would surely influence how other children perceived learning.

Inclusive teachers insisted on having high expectations for every child. They felt that the designation or the label itself should not get in the way of supporting children and expanding what they could possibly achieve. Teachers were careful about how children might interpret teachers' practices. They avoided positioning the child participants as incompetent, rather emphasising that everyone had something that s/he was good at and could contribute. To avoid negative labelling effects, they also tended to oppose categorising children by their differences.

To deal with the intellectual challenges that children might encounter in learning, teachers would prepare multiple learning tasks for children so that there was always something for every child to work with. They would notice which children were distracted and remind them to focus on learning. Step-by-step tutoring would be provided to any child who encountered difficulties.

Teachers paid great attention to how children perceived teaching and what was taught. Teachers' knowledge of children's perceptions was important in enabling them to support children's learning better. Besides devising group learning, they also

adjusted their instructions to make the learning content more relevant to children's everyday lives. For example, when analysing a Chinese essay about an ancient bridge, Ms Ding shared her own experience of visiting a newly built across-the-sea bridge in Shanghai, which triggered a lively discussion among pupils; they even continued to talk about it during breaks and wanted to visit it. Teachers also actively used their tone of voice, body language, images, games or multiple media (e.g. animation) to attract children's attention and make learning more interesting and fun. For instance, Ms Shen mimicked hens' crowing when she was reading an article written by *Laoshe*, which made pupils laugh out loud. Teachers did not hold up their position of authority as something that made them superior to pupils. They accepted being challenged by children and would happily acknowledge any mistakes or misunderstandings that they had caused.

These teachers were generally respectful, friendly and responsive towards children's thoughts, requests and questions. They were often found laughing together with children. They tended to trust pupils and provide them with opportunities to make choices and decisions. For instance, they might ask children to choose group buddies or learning tasks. The seating plan could be flexible and decided on by children. In one of the most effective lessons I observed, the maths teacher offered children choices of learning tasks, and after completing the basic ones, all pupils, including Ning, could not wait to try out the more challenging ones. Ms Zhang also reflected that, although she did not believe that the LRC pupils in her resource classroom would be able to do any hard puzzle games, she still decided to give them more choices, and was surprised when Sha and other pupils chose the harder one over the easier one and managed to complete it. In inclusive classrooms, learning among pupils happened often, either spontaneously or initiated by teachers. When children were working in groups, teachers would still be attentive to the quality of collaboration. They were responsive to children's requests but also left space for children to explore and solve questions on their own.

The class teachers who created more inclusive classrooms, such as Ms Jia and Ms Shen, were found to put great emphasis on their professional development. They were reflective about their practice: they constantly evaluated and assessed the

outcomes of their teaching, observed children's reactions, and shifted approaches when a strategy was not working as expected. They exhibited a problem-solving orientation: analysing the situation, seeking resources and information to inform decisions, and taking actions in time. Rather than relying on external training or instructions, they gained useful insights from the internal resources within schools, such as their own experiences, children's views and colleagues' comments. Ms Shen reflected on her practice, while noting that it was not easy to articulate it:

These strategies ... It is not like who has helped me. It is all because, you have got the experience, and if you are experienced, you will know. You will know what to do depending on the circumstance. In other words, no matter if a child has learning difficulty or s/he is an ordinary pupil, these, these strategies would come into shape naturally. I feel that this is not necessarily taught by others. Of course, because you, the first is to explore on your own. The second is that you have learned a lot in the university. But in fact, what you have learned in the university was theoretical. When you are actually doing it, you really have to count on, hmm, I mean you need to look at what is effective in your practice, and put it into reality. I won't focus too much on what kind of theories ... Indeed theories can be realised in practice. For example, of course you need to be kind to children. When you are teaching them, you have to make sure that they feel that you care about them. Then, kindness is there. I won't say that I am using what kind of strategies by separating all these. I feel that all the strategies are related to each other. It is totally about the effects. Do whatever is effective. If you think what you are doing is not effective, you should make a change.

(Interviews, Ms Shen, class teacher)

Other teachers like Ms Jia, Ms Ai and Ms Qian also felt that finding better ways of supporting the child participants' learning was a reflective process. Inclusive teachers recognised that they could play an important part in influencing children's learning outcomes, and that thus they should not give up exploring effective practices because of children's impairments.

Nevertheless, teachers also pointed out that in the current school system, there was now little time and space for them to think about their practices, given the heavy workload. Almost all the teachers hoped that paperwork related to the implementation of LRC could be reduced. Ms Ruan commented that daily and fleeting interactions could not be fully conveyed by filling in reports. Ms Guan also

noted that no-one from the authority was going to look carefully at all the reports. Teachers further revealed the struggles between their personal and professional lives:

I have been staying in this school for a long time, but now it has become busier and busier. I don't know what we are busy with. There is no time. There is simply no time to think about your teaching ... After I started teaching Year 4, I have always kept the teaching materials on my bed desk ... Now for those young teachers, the ones with young children at home, they really cannot handle it. They are not motivated to teach. Last night I was in the hospital accompanying my husband till midnight. I have my daughter back now. Every night I have to accompany her doing homework till 11pm.

(Interviews, Ms Ai, class teacher)

Although the extent to which teachers carried out inclusive practice varied, it was promising that all teachers were aware that their perceptions, beliefs and practices could change throughout their professional careers. During interviews, many teachers recalled their previous experiences of teaching disabled children and regretted that they had indeed been short of teaching experience at that time. For example, comparing Lian and a previous LRC pupil who had less severe learning difficulties, Ms Jun felt that she had now become more and more confident about her approach towards these children, and she was certain that Lian gained much better educational outcomes. Even Ms Xia, whose approach to Qi was seen as problematic, confessed that her perception of Qi and his family had been changing:

I feel that, because I am, am about to become a mother, I feel that it is really a disaster for a family if there is such a child. It seems that I could not understand that feeling before. I just thought that you were kind of unlucky. But later when I think about it, they are just like us who go through ten months' pregnancy. They may also dream and imagine how good this kid will turn out to be, then suddenly, you have to face such reality, which is indeed cruel.

(Interviews, Ms Xia, class teacher)

## 6.5 Participation and diversity

Being marked out for their differences, how the child participants were learning and participating in everyday school lives reflected deeply on how student diversity was understood, responded to and valued in a school community. After examining the elements of access, collaboration and achievement in the participating schools, in this section I will turn to the question of whether these children were fully accepted

by pupils and teachers, and what kind of interactions, policies and practices came into play in shaping their recognition. Insights were also gained into how teachers accepted each other.

### 6.5.1 Acceptance and recognition of students by students

Central to the rationale of implementing inclusive education is the creation of sufficient opportunities for children to understand and celebrate each other's individuality. As mentioned before, in Chinese schools, pupils from the same class tend to share a strong sense of membership in their class communities. Then did other pupils accept the child participants? During my fieldwork, I paid close attention to the interactions between the child participants and their peers. In previous sections, I have already described how pupils learned together and the marginalisation faced by the child participants. Here I will focus on their social relationships with other pupils. Since I did not seek other children's views directly for ethical reasons, I mainly drew on the observational data and what the child participants told me during interviews about their relationships with peers.

In a nutshell, most child participants experienced far less satisfying peer relationships than they might have. Out of 11 child participants, only Xin and Dan appeared to be content with their relationships with classmates. The rest often had very few pupils that they could socialise with. Meanwhile, bullying happened to all of them to different extents and in various forms.

#### *Friendships*

Having friends at school is important to a child's overall educational experience. Friendship can provide protection, support and companionship (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). During interviews, I asked the child participants who their friends were and what they did together. Although the number of friends a child had did not guarantee the quality of the friendships, it is helpful to show the numbers first before offering further analysis (Table 6.1).

Table 6.1 The number of friends nominated by children

	Friends among LRC pupils	Friends among non-LRC pupils
Sha	1	0
Qi	0	1
Ting	0	2
Li	0	0
Xin	0	10
Dan	2	8
Lulu	2	3
Ning	0	5
Wu	0	0
Rui	0	2
Lian	0	0

It can be seen from the table above that some children – Li, Wu and Lian – nominated no friends at all, although they had peer supporters who were assigned by teachers. Most of the children were clearly not popular; however, they might have close friends who they spent time with by playing or studying together. Xin and Dan had quite positive experiences of friendship, and identified many girls from their classes as friends.

It might seem easier for the child participants to become friends with other LRC pupils. Indeed, since very few children would be designated LRC pupils (usually at most one in a class), they did not have many chances to meet other LRC pupils. Only three children – Sha, Dan and Lulu – had other LRC pupils in their classes, and interestingly they also identified these children as friends.

Sha only named one friend and indeed had very limited social contacts with other pupils in her class. Her friend Xi was also an LRC pupil (see Illustration 2 for an account of their learning together). Both of them were largely marginalised, having no other friends apart from another girl with learning difficulties. They went to the resource classroom together and joined the same knitting interest club. They were also often ‘grouped’ together by teachers and peers. For example, they would be asked the same questions in lessons. When children were asked to do groupwork, these two were also expected to form a pair (Illustration 9). Sometimes, Ms Ding and Ms Zhang confused these two girls and called them by the wrong names. However,

Xi often tried to stay with other children when possible, which could result in Sha being left on her own.

### Illustration 9: Hard to find a group buddy

The teacher asks pupils to pair up with whomever they like. Soon they all find their buddies – only Sha, Xi and another learning disabled girl are left wandering. No one has even come to ask to pair up with any of them. The teacher comes over and asks Sha to pair up with a boy. The boy begs to the teacher: ‘Please don’t choose me!’ He seems to be quite unhappy about such an arrangement. Xi moves to another boy to form a pair. This boy also tries to hide away but she pushes him to where he should stand. He then says: ‘I should let you be together with Sha’.

By contrast, the friendship between Dan and Lulu turned out to be rather strong, entailing additional protective and supportive benefits. They played and chatted with each other, and also met up after school. Compared to Lulu, Dan was certainly more popular among pupils. However, Dan always cared about Lulu. When other pupils attempted to exclude Lulu from group activities, Dan would make sure that she was not left alone (Illustration 10).

The resource classrooms created chances for LRC pupils to meet each other. Although it might not lead to any extended friendships outside the classroom, children could find the companionship enjoyable. However, the relationships could be fragile and fleeting, given the fact that there were always pupils joining and leaving a resource classroom. Qi was very upset when his male buddy stopped coming to the resource classroom. He felt lonely because he was not interested in playing with other children there.

With the implementation of LRC, the notion of inclusion was introduced to schools, implying that disabled children should ‘mingle with’ non-disabled children. In Mingzhu School, embarking on application of the buzzword, the resource teacher Ms Zhang initiated a project called ‘Regular and Special Inclusion’ (*Pute Ronghe*), the purpose of which was to promote LRC pupils’ peer relationships by adding the agenda of ‘inclusion’ to existing classroom activities. However, most child participants were unable to enjoy social life, and other pupils were often unfriendly towards them: it was common to see pupils trying to keep their distance from



disabled children and refusing to talk to them, or getting angry when these children touched their desks or books.

### Illustration 10: Playing with friends

It is sports activity time – pupils can have some free time to play. Soon they form two large groups – girls and boys. Girls are playing rubber band and boys are doing rope jumping. Dan and Lulu choose to not join the girls – they are using Ping Pong rackets to bounce a kikbo back and forth. Suddenly, a girl runs over and grabs Dan, saying: ‘Dan, let me show you something really funny! Come over here!’ Dan is then dragged into the girls’ group and allocated a role as a ‘band holder’.

Lulu is left on her own. Dan is standing and holding the band with her legs, but she waves at Lulu and asks her to come over. The girls see Lulu approaching, so they grab her to hold the band as well. Both Dan and Lulu are now holding the band for other girls. They never get a chance to play.

Now and then, the girls would tell Lulu: ‘Hold it straight! I am telling you to hold it straight!’ Lulu turns her head and says to me: ‘This is way too boring!’ After a short while, Dan decides to use her Ping Pong racket to hold the band instead of using her leg. Then the band goes off abruptly so the game has to stop. Dan makes this look like an ‘accident’. The girls become angry, and Dan and Lulu run away in the chaos. Lulu finds her racket and says to Dan: ‘Let’s play this’.

However, Dan is soon pulled away by the girls to hold the band again. Lulu sits near her, watching. Dan looks back at Lulu, saying: ‘Lulu, we can continue. It doesn’t matter.’ Then Dan starts to play bouncing kikbo with Lulu while she is still holding the band.

Some of the child participants were complete ‘loners’ in regular classrooms, just staying on their own during breaks. Some might have random peers to play with, which was common for male child participants: they tended to have playmates with whom they played games during breaks. These games were mainly physical, such as chasing, pulling, pushing or hitting each other. However, little beyond playing took place between them and their playmates. The most common peer relationship between LRC pupils and non-LRC pupils was ‘the helper and the helped’, involving peer supporters. Some children nominated the supporters as their friends if they got

along well; nevertheless, as discussed in section 6.4.1, they rarely socialised with each other outside the ‘helping’ situations.

Differing drastically from most child participants, Xin and Dan formed rewarding friendships with non-LRC pupils in their classes. During breaks, they were often found in a mixed group of boys and girls, chatting or playing. They seemed to have little difficulty in joining other children’s activities and they were rarely left alone. They both felt that they could ask their classmates for help if they had any problems at school. Dan even acted as a leader in their ‘secret group’ which involved one boy and all the girls in her class: she was in charge of developing ‘codes’ for communication among members (so teachers could not understand the messages) and exploring the campus for potential ‘bases’ where they could hang out.

The child participants might struggle with their identities as LRC pupils. Sometimes, they could be pressured to choose which group they should be friends with, as in the dilemmatic situation that Dan experienced (Illustration 10). Moreover, the opening of resource classrooms generated the risk of LRC pupils being marked out as ‘different’ from other children. For instance, Xin would not share with her good friends the fact that she was studying in the resource classroom. When I handed her a photo of the resource classroom which she had asked to keep (because she liked the resource teacher), after taking it she turned the photo upside down and hid it in her palm, before sneaking into the classroom by the back door.

### *Bullying*

It has been reported that disabled/SEN children tend to have a high risk of being bullied at school (Luciano & Savage, 2007; Norwich & Kelly, 2004), and bullying also seems to be a recurrent theme of disabled children’s negative experiences at school (e.g. Connors & Stalker, 2007). In the participating schools<sup>41</sup>, teachers frequently stressed their efforts to protect disabled children from any kind of harm, by, for example, restricting their access to places or withdrawing them from ‘challenging’ academic learning. Thus it was surprising to find that almost all children noted bullying as the main negative experience in their peer relationships.

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<sup>41</sup> Explicit anti-bullying policies and ethos were absent in the participating schools.

A range of forms of bullying were mentioned by children or observed by me. The most common mode of bullying entailed physical or social harm. Sometimes, bullying could be converted, rationalised or integrated into games, requests or offers of help. Children could also be rather vulnerable to being framed by peers or coaxed into problematic conduct.

Physical bullying was often fleeting and difficult to spot by teachers, and almost solely initiated by male pupils, while the actions could be directed at both male and female disabled children. The intention of bullies to cause painful consequences was obvious, followed by no apology. The situation seemed to be worse for children with more severe difficulties. For instance, Lian was quite often physically bullied – tripped or kicked – by boys. I also observed once that her deskmate pinched her nose to stop her breathing. Illustration 11 shows how Wu’s group buddy bullied him in a PE lesson. However, helped by the teacher’s ignorance of what was going on, the boy instead managed to seek recognition from the teacher for his ‘support’ of Wu.

#### Illustration 11: Bullying in groupwork

The PE teacher asks pupils of the same gender to pair up and practise rope skipping. Wu and a boy next to him form a pair, and they stand facing each other. Wu was supposed to skip first and the boy was to count for him. Then they would swap. Wu starts skipping but stops after only one jump. He smiles with embarrassment.

He continues and the other boy helps with counting. Soon it is time to swap. The boy snatches the rope when Wu is still holding it. The rope traps one of Wu’s feet. But the boy decides to pull it over anyway. Wu is thus tripped and falls heavily on the ground. The boy, instead of helping him to stand up, shouts at Wu: ‘You! Look at me doing it!’, as if he is a model for Wu to learn from.

The boy starts skipping and Wu counts for him. After the boy finishes, he throws the rope to the ground rather than handing it over to Wu, so Wu has to go and pick the rope up. The teacher walks over and tells Wu: ‘You should try to reach 20 jumps’. Wu starts skipping again, but the boy constantly uses his leg to disturb him, which makes it impossible for Wu to continue skipping. Wu tries to step back to avoid being disturbed by the boy.

When the teacher calls the activity to a halt, the boy runs to the teacher eagerly, telling him that Wu has done 24 jumps. The teacher then comes over and holds Wu in his arms, saying: ‘That’s very good! You have completed the goal! Let’s clap for him!’ Hearing this, other boys standing nearby start to clap their hands. In the rest of the exercise, the boy keeps running to the teacher to report how many jumps Wu has made.

Bullying could take place verbally, as by mocking or teasing. Qi had been called ‘Mr Pacifier’ right from the beginning of school. Illustration 12 shows how complex and challenging daily processes could be in shaping Qi’s school life.

### Illustration 12: The portrait of Mr Pacifier

During my first visit to Mingzhu School, after a brief meeting with the special education coordinator, the resource teacher, Ms Zhang, was asked to give me an introduction to the school and the LRC pupils. Ms Zhang took me to her office, one she shared with other five core subject teachers for Year 3 because she was also teaching Chinese at the same time. She went through all the LRC pupils’ profiles with me and when it came to Qi, she invited the class teacher, Ms Xia, to tell me more about him. Ms Xia thus recalled the first day she met him: ‘He totally ignored me! He was just sucking his thumb’. Such behaviour was seen as bizarre by teachers and other pupils. ‘Because he would misbehave when we tried to stop him doing that, we decided to let him be. We call him Mr Pacifier.’

It was almost mid-term. The whole school became extremely busy with all kinds of inspections. Ms Zhang was also anxious about the presentation of her resource classroom. She asked another young male teacher to help take some photos of the LRC pupils. Then on a Thursday morning, I was sitting in Qi’s English lesson taught by Ms Xia. Several pictures of different animals were shown on the screen and the teacher asked pupils to think about using 7 English sentences to describe each animal. It was quiet in the classroom when that male teacher knocked on the door and asked Ms Xia if he could take some photos of Qi. Ms Xia nodded without saying a word. He entered, wearing a black T-shirt, black trousers, a pair of black shoes, and a black Cannon SLR camera with an external flash attached. Pupils including Qi looked at him but soon Ms Xia reminded them to go back to their study. The male teacher wandered around and carefully chose a spot at a perfect distance and angle. He bent over, used a desk to stabilise the camera and pressed the shutter several times. The crisp sounds carried a sense of professionalism. However, Qi ignored him; he did not look into the camera at all.

Two weeks later, some photos were chosen, printed out and inserted into wooden frames. Ms Zhang was very satisfied with the quality of the photos. She showed me a photo of Qi – the portrait of Mr Pacifier – in which he looked absentminded, with the thumb of his right hand in the mouth. He might have been trying to figure out as many English sentences as possible to describe his favourite animal but most likely, he was simply doing nothing. Ms Zhang commented with a thrilling tone: ‘Oh look at our “Big Bear”\* Qi! How lovely he is!’ These photos were placed in a cabinet in the resource classroom, ready for all the visitors from the LEAs and other schools to see from the photos how well the LRC pupils were included in the school.

\* ‘Big Bear’ is a character in a popular children’s animation in China representing strength, power and pride. Qi himself preferred to be called by this name.

There were immediate issues regarding the tolerance of name-calling by pupils and teachers. Despite the significant discrepancy between the infantilising nickname ‘Mr Pacifier’ and Qi’s self-image as the strong and powerful ‘Big Bear’, the photo of Mr Pacifier became a symbol of inclusion, and was hung up ironically in a separate space, that is, in a resource classroom.

Similarly, Sha was laughed at almost every time she tried to answer teachers’ questions during lessons. This made her rather embarrassed and nervous, so that she would blush and mutter a lot, which only triggered more teasing from other children. Surprisingly, teachers rarely put a stop to such teasing. Sha said that her classmates did not like her at all and that she felt more welcome in the resource classroom. Lian also was teased because she needed help from her mother to complete the homework. In addition, the child participants could suffer from name-calling. The ‘nicknames’ were associated with being slow at learning or less articulate when expressing themselves.

Wu was also given the nickname ‘dummy cicada’ by the headteacher, for being silent at school. Lian was called ‘pig’, and children from her class did not even hesitate to reveal this to me, which suggested that such name-calling was acceptable (Illustration 13).

### Illustration 13: The pig

Now it is break time and Lian is cleaning the blackboard at the front of the classroom. Pupils soon surround me and throw random questions. Soon a girl says to me: ‘Miss Wang, do you know that we have got a Pig\* in our class?’ I show my interest: ‘Oh?’ To me, it sounds like a friendly nickname for some naughty boy. I see Lian coming closer. Unexpectedly, the pupils turn around and point to her saying: ‘It is her! Because she is too stupid!’ I am totally shocked. Lian frowns and turns her back at us. She walks away, leaving me sitting at the centre of the crowd. I start to feel guilty. At that moment, I seem to have become part of the group that is making fun of her.

\* ‘Pig’ is a male character from a well-known Chinese novel published in the 16<sup>th</sup> century ‘Journey to the West’. It is often associated with the image of a lazy, foolish and funny person.

Sometimes, bullying could be more covert. For boys, such bullying was usually converted into games. The child participants might not clearly identify themselves as being bullied, though some scenarios could be quite compelling (Illustration 14).

Later during interviews, Rui also talked about how he played games with other boys. He was often asked to take up a ‘victim’ role. For instance, they often played a game called ‘blind man walking’, in which one pupil needed to catch other children with eyes covered. Rui said that he was always the unlucky one who had to be blindfolded, and that it was impossible for any of the other children to play the blind man.

#### Illustration 14: Losing the game

The bell rings and pupils start to move around. Rui stands up and walks towards the back of the classroom. He makes a face at me, smiling. Many boys gather and start to push each other over, as they do during every lesson break. They are competing over who is stronger and who is the most powerful. Rui also actively joins the game, initiating attacks on other boys, which provokes more counter-attacks from them. The situation develops like a battle scene in a film: at first, it looks all messy when the soldiers fight each other. But soon, there will be one-on-one fights among the survivors. Rui now is confronted by a boy who looks more robust and taller than him. Other boys step back and stand in a circle, staying close enough to watch the fight.

Rui and the boy start wrestling with each other. They look so serious, as if this is not just a game anymore. Their arms are twisted together, struggling to topple the other down. Neither would loosen his hold. Finally Rui is dragged over and pressed down to the ground. At that moment, I feel relieved that his head does not hit the ground because he is wearing a thick down jacket. He loses the game. He is already lying on the floor but the other boy would not let him go. The boy tries to step on Rui. He puts one foot on Rui’s arms and the other on his chest. He raises his head in pride of victory. Rui could not move at all. Another boy in the crowd also moves forward: He tentatively puts one of his feet on Rui’s legs.

Rui is under the boy’s feet for about two minutes. He seems to be exhausted and he stops struggling, just lying quietly on the ground like a captured prey. The boy who wins the game is showing off to the crowd how powerful he is.

For girls, covert bullying was often disguised as kind gestures, such as offering or asking for help. Lulu complained that her classmates often asked to borrow money from her which they never paid back. Sometimes when she refused such requests, she was told that her schoolbag would be thrown out of the window. There was also

one occasion in Lian's classroom when a girl came to her and took her scarf off, offering to tie it again in a more beautiful style. Lian did not want her to do this; she gripped the scarf tightly and tried to get away. However, the girl would not let Lian go and tried to grab the scarf, saying: 'Don't move! Don't move! It should be like this!' Lian started to cry. Seeing this, the girl immediately released her hands and ran away.

Other forms of bullying involved framing or coaxing. Xin said that once she was framed for stealing a boy's book but that it was actually the boy himself who had put it into her schoolbag. Lulu recalled that she was forced by other children to do things that she did not want to, such as 'checking' their class monitor's schoolbag at the risk of being caught and punished by teachers. Once she was also asked by a pupil to help him lie to his parents, and was promised some cash in return. Lulu turned the 'offer' down because her mother had told her that she should not accept any 'dirty' money. Indeed, such framing and coaxing could lead to unfavorable consequences if children failed to make an ethical judgment.

When talking about bullying experiences, the child participants recalled distressing, tormenting and angry emotions, which I observed from the changed tones and frowning eyebrows. The bullying was mostly initiated by other pupils without any provocation from the child participants. I went on to ask what they would do when bullying happened, and the main difference in their responses was between whether to ask for help or keep things to themselves.

It was more common for children with Mild Learning Difficulties to seek help from teachers, compared to children with more severe impairments. Children would usually go to adults when bullying was causing harm. Normally after a teacher's intervention, they would accept an apology from the bullies. However, this seems to be less helpful with children's long-term exposure to bullying. In fact, some forms of intervention might reinforce the marginalisation and exclusion of these children, for example when a child was re-seated to keep him/her away from other pupils. Besides seeking help from adults, Lulu noted that she could also get help from her good friends such as Dan. She said that as long as Dan was there, she would not be afraid of a boy who used to kick her.

There were various reasons why the child participants might avoid reporting bullying to teachers. Some children were rather disappointed by teachers' carelessness and ineffective interventions, and they lost trust in teachers. For example, Sha felt that even if she went to a teacher, she might not be able to describe what happened clearly enough to make the teacher understand and believe her. Interestingly, children would also choose not to report bullying out of sympathy for other pupils: if the bullies were punished by teachers, it would make them feel hurt too. Although Li was annoyed by some girls who often took her stationery away, she said that she did not want to tell teachers about it because she did not want those girls to be criticised. Dan pointed out that the view was common among peers that no-one should take revenge because there was no point in causing more harm. Even if children decided to get back at the bullies, they would only use 'mild' methods. For example, after a boy threw an eraser at her, Xin said that she would thus refuse to tell him what the homework was if he needed help. Sha kicked back after being kicked by boys but she stressed the difference: 'I was not like them being that hard. I just kicked gently'.

### *Belonging*

The child participants wanted to be accepted as part of the class communities. Even if teachers punished them much less than other pupils, this would not make a difference to their judgements as to whether or not a teacher was good: being fair to all children was incredibly important. Li did not like a teacher who used harsh language to criticise other children. Lulu felt sorry for her classmates who were punished by being made to run 15 laps around the playground, and especially for the boy who had to do 19 laps for deliberately falling over her.

Children's feelings of belongingness were associated closely with the quality of their peer relationships. Dan and Lulu expressed a strong sense of belonging to their class and school community. Dan took me to a big stone laid on the grass near the school gate, which was donated by an alumnus. It was carved with the words 'a place to start dreaming' and Dan could not agree more with the message. She said that after graduation, she would still come back often to visit her teachers. She and her classmates promised that they would have a reunion at school when they turned 16. She took a photo of the main school building, because it was going to be the most



memorable place for her. Lulu also took a photo of the main school, saying: 'Because this is it. We come here. All other people would know that we are very happy'.

### 6.5.2 Acceptance and recognition of students by staff

Since I visited different classrooms and schools, I inevitably met teachers who were kind, fair and accepting towards all children in their classrooms, and some who seemed to be biased and often blamed children and their families. Whether disabled children were accepted and respected by teachers has already been shown in previous sections of this chapter.

Generally, the child participants were found to be very sensitive to teachers' attitudes, perceptions and practices towards them. They were able to detect the kind of pupils they were in teachers' eyes, for example they could tell whether a teacher believed in a child's competence (see section 6.4.1), the awareness of which also informed children's learning and actions in classrooms.

There was variation in how much effort teachers were willing to make to support disabled children in their regular classrooms. Such decision-making involved ethical and moral considerations (Bullough, 2011). For children who had better experiences of inclusion, their class teachers also strongly believed that once a child was enrolled in their classes, they were obliged to be responsible for him/her regardless of the child's differences. Such commitment was an essential starting point in ensuring that every pupil was included in a class community.

The child participants did like the teachers who accepted them in the first place. These teachers appeared to be respectful, patient and approachable. They recognised the importance of understanding children's views and experiences, consciously reflected on what children would make of what they were doing, and embraced such knowledge to inform their daily decision-making. They argued that disabled children should be perceived as being the same as other pupils in spite of medical labels. In terms of teaching, they focused on how to cultivate children's individual interests and make the curriculum more relevant to children's lives. They seemed to trust in everyone's ability to learn, and were available when children needed further help.

They understood that disabled children might show some variation in their progress in academic learning, but they always highlighted the value of having the child participants in their classes. They showed sympathy for children's families and felt that everyone needed to contribute to make a child's life better.

These teachers also tended to mediate negative labelling effects more effectively. As an observer, I could directly sense that pupils in their classrooms felt secure enough to participate and accept challenges. The connection between pupils and teachers seemed to be genuine at a personal level, not solely as an instrument for achievement of better academic performances. Also, they did not overlook children's social and emotional wellbeing. With a strong sense of community in these classrooms, participation and learning happened 'naturally' – everyone understood that they had a common cause. I am not glossing over the pressure from the performative school culture. Indeed, many teachers, because of being very busy and distracted, were not paying enough attention to the child participants' peer relationships, and could be ignorant of how their practices might influence children's interactions. Nevertheless, these teachers, while being aware of structural restrictions, exercised their agency to negotiate a better space for all children to learn and participate in.

In relation to the performative culture, in a regular classroom there was a tendency for pupils with better academic performances to be given more chances to participate. For instance, they might have more opportunities to take part in extra-curricular activities. These children were positioned as models and were also less likely to be blamed by teachers (an example being the teacher's tolerance of the 'good' pupil in Illustration 15).

As acknowledged by the child participants, the way for them to gain more opportunities was to get better results in exams, a situation which was seen as devastating. The child participants disliked teachers who often punished pupils, even if the punishment was not directed at them. As mentioned in section 6.4.2, the agenda of academic performance was so prominent that it legitimised pupils' sacrifice of their emotional wellbeing. With the intention of pushing pupils towards better academic performance, teachers often caused distress to pupils, which also brought unhappiness to themselves. During the fieldwork, I found that teachers could

easily lose their temper in front of pupils, raising their voices and mocking, upsetting or undermining pupils. In Mingzhu School, a cleaner commented that teaching had become a horrible job because she saw teachers always yelling at children. Ms Xia said that punishment was the most efficient way to ‘control’ pupils’ behaviour, so children like Qi would fear making mistakes. Unable to get to know children, teachers could experience a loss of genuine relationships.

Meanwhile, the child participants could become resentful of the teachers who marginalised them in learning and activities, criticised them often and ignored their voices. These teachers tended to understand children only by their medical labels, which singled them out as deficient. Some teachers also were prejudiced towards disability, suggesting that these children’s birth was a mistake or a tragedy. In practice, they underestimated children’s abilities and often failed to engage them. There was a clear division between the position of a teacher and that of a pupil; hence children’s feelings and thoughts were deemed of less account than adults’. Without a genuine appreciation of children’s worlds, teachers perceived them as ‘too sensitive’ – making a fuss over something really trivial. Other, non-disabled children’s, views were also seen as more authentic or ‘true’, with the result that the child participants could remain voiceless (Illustration 15).

When teachers did not recognise the importance of learning for the child participants, they identified their principle as ‘caring more’; terms like ‘caring’, ‘concern’, ‘looking after’ or ‘paying attention to’ were frequently heard from teachers. Teachers felt sympathy for the children because they had to live with their disabling conditions. Such a notion did reflect a charitable model of disability associated with humanitarian benevolence in Confucian thinking, implying that disabled children were so vulnerable and disadvantaged by their impairments that they deserved extra care and protection. It was also consistent with the policy discourse of LRC, presenting the moral aspect of providing education for disabled children.

### Illustration 15: Drink the water

After lunch break, pupils are sitting in the classroom and are required to listen to the 'Red Scarf Broadcast'. The English teacher walks in and says that there is going to be an English competition in the school. Many pupils put up their hands and want to be picked by the teacher. I hear some pupils shouting some pupil's name saying that he should not be allowed to go because 'he is awful at it'.

I see that Lian's deskmate, a boy, is taking her hot water bottle out of her desk. He takes off the cap and pours some water into it. He asks Lian to drink from the cap. She does not respond. Then he adds some ink in the cap and the water turns blue. He again asks Lian to drink the water. Pupils sitting around them come closer to watch what's going on. Lian still does not want to drink it. The boy tries to force her – he picks up the cap and moves it to Lian's mouth. Lian starts to cry.

This draws the teacher's attention and she walks over to check what's wrong. The boy is panicked. He quickly pats the back of a boy sitting before him, who is a 'good' pupil with excellent academic performance, saying: 'You just say you did this'. The teacher arrives and asks: 'What happened?' Lian's deskmate points to the 'good' pupil and answers: 'He pours some water into the cap from her water bottle'. The teacher looks very confused and stands there for seconds. She cannot understand how this could be serious enough to make Lian cry. So she says to Lian: 'Stop crying, Lian. Just drink the water'. Lian is so upset. She wipes her tears and throws the tissues onto the floor. The teacher asks her deskmate to pick up the rubbish and only warns the 'good' pupil: 'Don't do this anymore.'

Teachers' most remarkable demonstration of 'caring more' was to position the child participants as the ones that they would always take sides with. For example, Ms Ruan noted that even if Li was sometimes aggressive towards other pupils, she would never criticise 'such kinds of children'. Ms Jun also stressed that she would always be biased towards Lian because 'after all she is a special child'. Ms Ding also asked other pupils to tolerate Sha because of her impairment:

For pupils, normally, I whispered to them that they needed to tolerate Sha a little bit more. Don't get into trouble like what you do with other typical pupils ... But for Sha, you have to tolerate her absolutely ... I have told the boys. You should try not to deal with her as much as possible, right? After all, she is like this. If something happens, you should not blame her, right? Because she is like that, I said that you needed to be tolerant. OK. They said that they knew about this. All these pupils know about this.

(Interviews, Ms Ding, class teacher)

Thus, even if teachers believed that a conflict among pupils was the child participant's faults, they still tended to tell off other pupils and ask them to put up

with the child participant. Teachers even felt that, in this sense, disabled children were becoming a privileged group in the school: with the implementation of LRC policy, disabled children were receiving more and more attention and resources. They could stand out from their peers for having teachers at their back. Ms Xia commented that Qi seemed to be taking advantage of this privileged position:

He is like ... How to say it about this child ... He is not a bad person. But I feel that now he is aware that he is privileged. He seems to know that he is different from others. So for those many things he has done wrong, he would sometimes fool you (*Dao Jianghu*). I mean, he seems to ... he has got a gut feeling that 'you people will not punish me' ... They (other pupils) would question: why should we put up with you? why does the teacher speak for you when I am bullied by you? or, why does the teacher refuse to take our side after us being mistreated by you?

(Interviews, Ms Xia, class teacher)

Although teachers could be aware of the on-going bullying, they found it hard to come up with effective strategies. In the case of boys like Qi and Rui, teachers found it difficult to draw a line between bullying and friendship (playing games together). Ms Xia called the two boys who often played with Qi as 'evil friends' (*Hupenggouyou*), because they were seen as a bad influence on him. She wanted the two boys to stop playing with Qi. However, one of the boys would actually try to engage Qi in group activities, and Qi recognised him as his only and best friend. Meanwhile, teachers also tended to rationalise bullying. Ms Zhao referred to her own childhood memories:

Because we were also like this in schools when we were young. There could be some weird or left-behind kids. Maybe it is only like this when you are also a pupil. It is different now as a teacher. But if you are a pupil, it is very natural that you just won't be together with her, right? That is simply a child's mind.

(Interviews, Ms Zhao, resource teacher)

Encountering the dilemma of difference, teachers tended to struggle with how to ensure equity in their classrooms: should they do something extra for disabled children? would that be unjust towards other children? For example, feeling guilty about seating a very 'naughty' boy next to Lian (see Illustration 15 for the account of him bullying her), Ms Jun also felt that it was unfair to the boy to make him Lian's deskmate.

But there were also teachers who insisted that the principle on which to make a judgement should be consistently applied to every pupil because it was important to maintain an overall sense of fairness in a classroom. They saw the conflicts among pupils as opportunities for children to understand each other and learn social skills, which could be beneficial for their future participation in society. Teachers also referred to the idea of constructing a class community to cultivate positive peer relationships. Ms Ruan explained that a class should bring a feeling of ‘warmth’ into children’s hearts. Ms Jia commented that a classroom should be like a home to all children:

The culture of the classroom ... is to often educate children not to bully their classmates. They should support each other and stay more united ... Treat the classroom like their own home.

(Interviews, Ms Jia, class teacher)

The child participants’ negative peer relationships in regular classrooms seemed to give resource classrooms a substantial reason to exist. Ms Guan argued that because disabled children were likely to be marginalised in regular classrooms, they should come to the resource classroom to make friends and gain a sense of belonging. By being associated with her – a teacher – these children could also feel empowered to stand proudly in front of their peers when they were back in the regular classroom.

The implementation of LRC policy reinforced the assumption that ‘special’ education should be provided for ‘special’ children. Regular teachers were seen to be confused as to whether they could get it right in their classrooms, when they were being persuaded that disabled children would be better off with different ways of teaching or specialists. Although teachers might retain their sensitivity to negative labelling effects and keep looking for ways to minimise the stigma, they found it hard to conceal all information about the labels. Teachers expressed a sense of helplessness over their inability to introduce more reforms, despite their resilience in living with dilemmas, uncertainties and tensions while negotiating disabled children’s learning and participation.

### 6.5.3 Acceptance and recognition of staff by staff

In section 6.3.3, I have already discussed issues of collaboration among teachers. Teachers of non-core subjects were disappointed at their own marginalised positions, for example when they were asked to give away time to core subjects. Regular teachers also felt obliged to send LRC pupils to the resource classroom to comply with LRC policy. The participating schools varied in their recognition of staff.

In Yulan School, due to its history of having a special class, the headteacher attached negative labels to the staff associated with special education, commenting: ‘Of course only the worst teachers would be assigned to such classrooms. No one would want to do it’. In Hongxing School, Ms Guan pointed out that she was seen as ‘strange’ when she opposed the school’s performative agenda. She felt that people found her annoying because she preferred to find ways of including children rather than excluding them. She felt that the senior management group was not supportive of her work.

Things seemed to be more relaxed in Mingzhu School and Wen Yuan School. However, in Mingzhu School, the shared vision seemed to be to accommodate disabled children in the resource classroom. In the case of the more inclusive Wen Yuan School, Ms Shen highlighted the role of the headteacher. Since the headteacher did not differentiate between teachers’ performance-bonuses on the basis of pupils’ academic performance, Ms Shen recognised this policy as helpful in developing a ‘working together’ relationship among teachers. Ms Shen gave high praise to her colleagues as well. She felt that she was so passionate about improving her teaching that it somehow made her ‘different’ from other teachers. However, she still felt accepted by her colleagues, as shown by their understanding of her preference to work in an individual room rather than chatting with them in the office. She also claimed that she learned a lot from her colleagues about tolerance and living together. Ms Shen was able to negotiate with the headteacher to keep her LRC pupils in her regular classroom, rather than strictly following the policy regulation.

## 6.6 Summary

This chapter presented the research findings following the structure of the *Framework for Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Rich and detailed description was given of how the four elements of participation – access, collaboration, achievement and diversity – were addressed and negotiated in schooling processes. Disabled children's views and experiences of schooling were put in a prominent position. Teachers' accounts and actions reaffirmed their important roles in shaping children's school experiences through everyday practice.

To summarise, it was found that the child participants' access to regular schools and classes was guaranteed. As stipulated by the LRC policy, eliminating LRC pupils' academic results from league tables served as a condition of these children's continued placement in regular settings. However, within schools, the resistance to including disabled children reinforced the need to provide resource classrooms, which represented a new form of marginalisation and exclusion. Not all children could access a complete curriculum, and this limitation applied especially to LRC pupils. The child participants' opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities were largely restricted by the perception of them as incompetent and in need of protection. These children were also inhibited from accessing places and spaces where the excessive protection could hinder their participation.

Without teachers' effective supervision and guidance, the child participants could be subject to marginalisation during group learning. Children could gain helpful support from peer supporters. However, sometimes the supporters might take advantage of the unbalanced power relations. Although many teachers paid little attention to learning with and from these children, some teachers did recognise the invaluable benefits of listening to and acting upon children's voices. How teachers worked together had evident impacts on the provision for disabled children. Tensions existed between regular teachers and resource teachers because of a collision of beliefs.

The child participants were working hard to keep up with the curriculum. Their experiences of participation in academic learning varied greatly across teachers' classrooms. Children articulated the kind of teaching practices that could engage



them in learning inclusively, and identified barriers that prevented them from learning. Children were particularly aware of teachers' perceptions of their abilities, and their views of themselves could be powerfully influenced by teachers' views. In the prevailing performative school culture, the exclusion of disabled children from learning tended to be legitimised as a realistic choice by teachers, but ironically brought emotional benefits for children and also for teachers. To explore the 'hope' of implementing inclusive education, teachers' inclusive practices were further highlighted.

Regarding acceptance and recognition among pupils and teachers, I found that in inclusive classrooms, the child participants were more likely to enjoy friendships where children respected and supported each other more. However, most child participants were socially marginalised or excluded in their regular classrooms.

Bullying was seen to be the main source of negative experiences of peer relationships. Various forms of bullying took place, with an apparent lack of effective intervention by teachers. Children expressed their willingness to belong to the class and school communities. Teachers' recognition of children seemed to be influenced by the medical discourse of disability, the performative school culture and the charitable ethos of Confucian benevolence. Some light was also shed on teachers' acceptance of each other.

## Chapter 7 Discussion

### 7.1 Introduction

To understand the current status of disabled children's learning and participation in regular schools in Shanghai since the implementation of LRC, I conducted a qualitative and ethnographic inquiry with a group of learning disabled children and their teachers, using multiple methods. In the last chapter, I presented the research findings, reflecting on how access, collaboration, achievement and diversity (*Framework for Participation*. Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) were negotiated in everyday schooling processes. Rich and thick description was provided, representing the complex interactions that shaped disabled children's inclusion and exclusion. Most findings focused on meaning-construction among school members at micro-level. Nevertheless, the collection of contextual information also brought insights into the structural issues that underpinned the current provision. I should note that the research data were generated through my relations with participants; other researchers might observe contrasting processes and draw different conclusions regarding disabled children's and teachers' experiences and perspectives. The foregrounding of reflexivity in this research makes the current research significantly distinct from the available research on the implementation of LRC, by approaching a more trustworthy understanding of the research focus and illuminating ways to move forward towards inclusive schooling in the specific social and cultural context of China.

In Chapter 3, I formulated the main research questions as:

- *How do disabled children (designated as LRC pupils) understand, experience and negotiate their learning and participation in regular schools in Shanghai?*
- *How do teachers, being significant adults for children, perceive and negotiate the learning and participation of disabled children (designated as LRC pupils)?*
- *What are the facilitators of and barriers to their learning and participation?*

This research found that, with appropriate methods and balanced power relations, the child participants were able to voice their views on schooling. A few children appeared to have much better experiences of inclusion in regular schools than others. All of them revealed both positive and negative experiences in various aspects of school life. The prominent issues brought into focus were the relationships with peers and teachers, the sense of togetherness and belonging, and opportunities to achieve in learning, access a variety of subjects, take part in extra-curricular activities and have their voices heard in decision-making. The child participants identified how the perceptions of teachers and peers towards their competence could hinder their learning and participation, and reflected on how their lives were affected by high academic pressure on pupils and teachers. Children exercised their agency by displaying resistance to being separated or differentiated, and constructing their learner identities actively.

Teachers were found to have different beliefs about the inclusion of disabled children. The marginalisation of disabled children could be justified by teachers' misrecognition of children's abilities, the discourse of protection and the pressure to cater to other children's learning for the sake of better academic performance. However, there were also teachers who demonstrated inclusive practices in classrooms, showed strong commitment to negotiating all children's learning and participation, held high expectations of disabled children's capacities, and emphasised their own professional development. Specifically, they were attentive to children's views and experiences and used such knowledge to inform their practice.

To promote disabled children's inclusion in regular schools, the role of teachers' everyday practices could not be more important. However, several barriers to the process of including disabled children were also evident: the introduction of special educational thinking and practice, which tended to marginalise disabled children and underplay the existing inclusive practice in regular classrooms; the charitable model of disability in Confucian society, which overly stressed 'caring' without participation; and the extremely competitive and performative school culture, which gave rise to prejudice towards pupils and restricted space for social relationships, reflective thinking and diversity.

Therefore, what could I possibly learn from this inquiry? How could it contribute to our knowledge of inclusive education? In light of the research evidence, what perspectives would I come to agree with and what notions should I cast doubt on, in relation to existing debates and arguments? What interpretations could I confidently claim and what issues might remain puzzling, which might be understood in alternative ways? This chapter aims to present an extended discussion of the meanings of the research findings. In section 7.2, I will first discuss what could be learned from listening to disabled children. I highlight the value of children's voices, and discuss the main issues surrounding the four elements of participation (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). In section 7.2.3, I specifically examine how disabled children become subject to the process of marking-out and marginalisation. Section 7.3 focuses on teachers' role in promoting or hindering inclusion. In section 7.3.2, I will revisit the potential implications of pupil voice for developing inclusive practice that I proposed in an earlier chapter. Section 7.4 offers a further discussion of what children's and teachers' testimony means for the implementation of LRC in China. I also attempt to present a working model of moving forward towards inclusive schooling, with pupil voice as the core practice.

## 7.2 Learning from children

Situating disabled children's voices at the heart of the inquiry, this research is able to fill in the blanks since, in China, these voices are still largely missing from academic research on inclusive education. I recognised it as important to listen to what children have to say, not only for its pedagogical benefits through informing educational practice (Rudduck & McIntyre, 2007), but also as a manifestation of inclusive values (Messiou, 2012; Morgan, 2011) questioning the medical-psycho thinking of disabilities/SEN, which often undermines the significance of children's views and experiences. Through shifting the research relationship to one of researching *with* children, utilising participatory methods and respecting the child participants as competent social actors, the challenges of listening to the child participants' voices were effectively overcome, which confirmed the necessity of transforming the methodological framework in order to reframe our understanding of children's worlds. By this means I was enabled to see children beyond their disability labels as

agents exhibiting great awareness, alertness and sensitivity towards the circumstances they were living in.

### 7.2.1 Understanding children's worlds

The child participants enjoyed taking part in this research, in which an adult figure showed interest in knowing about their feelings, thoughts and ideas from a respectful and non-judgemental stance. My genuine curiosity about their stories differentiated my role from that of teachers or parents who might judge or correct what children say and do. The fieldwork experience gave me the impression of children's immense eagerness and longing to have opportunities and space to voice their concerns and share their aspirations to improve the provision. Also, my visits seemed to have offered children companionship, which appeared to be largely absent in some child participants' school lives. Indeed, researchers have extensively shared such a positive research experience in pupil voice projects – the experience of feeling welcomed and well responded to by children (e.g. Rose & Shevlin, 2004).

As shown in Chapter 6, all child participants were able to share their insights into the current educational provision and their relationships with teachers and peers, showing that they actively attempted to understand what was going on in their school lives. In line with many researchers' assertions based on empirical research (e.g. Davis & Watson, 2000; Herd, 2010; Mortier et al., 2011), I argue that disabled children could act as their own agencies, whose voices should be heard rather than being wholly represented by adults. Also, the child participants demonstrated that they had rather clear ideas about the supports needed and the barriers to their learning and participation, concerns which were also encountered by researchers (e.g. Cefai & Cooper, 2010; Mortier et al., 2011). This suggests an explicit role of pupil voice in informing the development of inclusive educational policy and practice.

At a glance, the issues that the child participants felt deeply concerned about appeared to be trivial, insignificant and fleeting. However, it should be seen that these daily experiences facilitated the child participants' overall sense of inclusion in their class and school communities. Listening to pupil voice thus means that greater attention and empathy are paid to these trivial matters. It means standing in

children's shoes so as to appreciate what's important, meaningful and significant to children, rather than ignoring or underplaying such issues as irrelevant to education.

The child participants in this research expressed quite different views compared to those of the teachers, such as their contrasting understandings of resource classrooms, which had been frequently encountered by researchers (McCluskey et al., 2013; Schauwer et al., 2009). The 'invisibility' of children's worlds might be a result of adults' undervaluing of children's voices, the shortage of space for voices to emerge and teachers' limited effort and time to pay attention to what was going on in children's daily lives. Listening to pupil voice greatly extended and opened up access to a relatively hidden world in schools that was much less exposed to teachers, especially the interactions between the child participants and their peers. The normative practice of teachers speaking for children without being aware of the impacts of their decisions should be challenged.

Certain strategies of pupil voice might be implemented in schools, such as pupil surveys or stipulated time for teachers to directly engage with pupils. I suggest that it is insufficient to have these mechanisms in place – children could still deliberately withhold their views and experiences from teachers, as found in this research (e.g. see section 6.5.1 for how the child participants dealt with bullying). The motive behind such silence was not so much concern over privacy as children's disbelief in the likelihood of teachers acting on the information. Such a finding indicates that the key to making children's hidden voices heard is to continuously gain their trust by respecting, valuing and acting upon these voices.

The child participants' role in decision-making at school was largely limited. Nevertheless, besides solely relying on individual teachers' supports, it should be highlighted that children were also negotiating their circumstances through actively identifying possible ways that might work for them, such as using certain strategies to avoid going to resource classrooms or finding ways to mediate their images of incompetence and disengagement in inclusive classrooms. Thus, the child participants' reflections on the educational provision and their struggles for change confirmed that children were capable of contributing to the process of developing inclusive practice, rather than passively waiting to be included, as noted by Florian

and Black-Hawkins (2011). Pupils can act and should be treated as equal partners alongside all other school community members.

### 7.2.2 Participation and exclusion

In Chapter 6, I have described the child participants' experiences in regular schools. Although some children did appear to be participating to a greater extent and having more positive comments to make on their school lives, similar to what Davis (2007) and Adderley et al. (2015) found, children's experiences of inclusion or exclusion were contingent and fluid: being included or excluded could happen to every child, highly depending on the micro processes of specific situations. For example, being fairly popular in her class, Dan could experience exclusion when she was asked to quit her student cadre position, while Qi enjoyed the company of his playmates though he was largely marginalised in the class. Therefore, it is problematic to attribute a child's inclusion or exclusion only to his/her individual factors such as impairments of disabled children. Instead, whether inclusion happens is mainly constructed through social interactions among pupils and teachers in schools.

In the following, I will discuss the research findings on the four elements of participation respectively (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). I note that no single element could stand on its own as the determinant factor in children's schooling experiences, given the complex processes involved; the interrelatedness among the elements were already noted by Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011). For instance, being marginalised in group learning showed that the child participants were not fully accepted by peers, which could also lead to their limited participation in learning and interfere with academic achievements.

#### *Access*

Although the discussion of inclusive education tended to move beyond securing the physical presence of disabled children in regular settings, full access was not yet realised in China despite changes in policy texts. As found in this research, disabled children's access to regular schools and classrooms was not granted as their basic educational right, but was a compromise due to the lack of special schools and the pressure to achieve full coverage of compulsory education. Disabled children's right

to stay in regular settings was granted in exchange for removing their academic performances from league tables. Such a strategy, which implied the 'worthlessness' of disabled children to regular schools, indeed showed great impacts on teachers' daily decisions about including or excluding these children in learning and activities. The opening of resource classrooms, endorsed as 'the best and the must' to ensure disabled children's inclusion, instead performed more as a new form of exclusion experienced by the child participants. Such special provision tended to limit children's opportunities to learn alongside peers, but served other 'needs' like not interrupting teaching and learning in regular classrooms.

The notion of competence was found to be prominent in shaping their chances to access classroom learning and school activities and to experience achievement (further discussed later). Being clearly aware of teachers' low expectations, children might internalise negative self-perceptions. However, it was also evident that children were resisting the imposition of such images and wished for recognition, especially from teachers, which was in line with Davis and Watson's (2001) finding that disabled children's competence was negotiated rather than pre-determined. This indicates the important role of teachers' practices in enhancing what children could achieve.

The marginalisation of non-core subjects, which applied to all pupils, is not uncommon in an era of standardised testing (e.g. McMurrer, 2007). The impacts of this phenomenon on disabled/SEN children's schooling experiences, however, were much less known. The child participants desired a variety of available subjects, but the narrowed curriculum restricted their chances to experience achievement, and their interests and skills were not equally valued. I argue that in a school culture where pupils' value is only judged by academic performances in the core subjects, there is a lack of genuine acceptance and recognition of pupils' individualities. For disabled children who are likely to be marginalised in classrooms, the narrowed curriculum could also limit the precious space where teachers and other children could get to see, learn about and appreciate their competence and the diversity of meaningful achievements, a situation which only impedes the process of inclusion.



Similarly, all pupils' safety was stressed in the participating schools through the regulation of pupils' access to places. The restriction of the child participants' mobility was justified by the particular need of protection caused by their impairments, a policy which at the same time tended to interfere with their participation. Within classrooms, the seating plan for the child participants could have direct effects on their access to group learning. Adderley et al. (2015) also found that the seating plan was one of the prominent issues concerning children's inclusion and they thus suggested that teachers should give children free choices. However, I argue that such a solution might be insufficient on its own, because this research found that when pupils were 'free' to choose whom they sat next to for groupwork, disabled children could still be left out. Thus what is needed is for teachers to be aware of the interactions among pupils in order to facilitate the opportunities for children to learn with each other.

### *Collaboration*

The significance of pupils learning together was highlighted by the child participants. Strategies like group learning could be especially effective in a large class with only one teacher, when children provide support for each other and enjoy working collectively towards a common goal. While recognising the usefulness of peer support strategies, I need to note that these strategies do not automatically guarantee learning and could risk being tokenistic; it was seen that disabled children were extremely vulnerable to marginalisation when effective guidance and supervision from teachers were missing, and the assigned peer supporters exploited power relations. Such marginalisation, I consider, is rooted in the performative school culture rather than merely in some individual children's behaviour, because the child participants were also observed to reject working with other children less competent than themselves. Thus, to truly value every child as a person, the performative culture, in which children with better performances are more sought after and some others inevitably sidelined, has to be tackled.

Including teachers in this research brought more insight into how teachers' collaboration with other teachers and families could directly or indirectly shape children's encounters at school, a factor which might not necessarily be mentioned

by children themselves. In the participating schools, the tension between regular teachers and resource teachers was remarkable. The two groups tended to hold contrasting beliefs about what was the best provision for disabled children: where they should learn, what and how they should be taught and with whom they should learn together. This divergence urgently needs reconciliation so that teachers can work together for disabled children's inclusion. In this research, the supports from families were substantial for disabled children, and in the Confucian filial culture, it was not surprising that children tended to conform to families' interests and wishes. Thus I argue that teachers should find ways of working with families rather than undermining them, which can only lead to children's resentment of teachers.

### *Achievement*

I do not deny that because of their intellectual impairments, the child participants could struggle with their academic learning. Nevertheless, the extent to which they could achieve was highly dependent on the interactive processes in specific learning environments. If children are willing to take responsibility for their learning, as was found in this research, what is needed is for teachers to create the enabling conditions for these children.

As mentioned above, the construction of disabled children as incompetent pupils constituted the major barrier to children's achievement in learning, and was often used by teachers to legitimise restricted opportunities and different treatments. Low educational expectations of disabled children are not surprising, and have been frequently reported by researchers (e.g. Davis & Watson, 2001; McGrew & Evans, 2004; Martin & Franklin, 2010; Shevlin & Rose, 2003). The recognition of children's fluid learner identities is needed in schools to counter the assumption of incompetence, which could be reinforced by the medical discourse.

The research findings which suggested removing LRC pupils' results from league tables did not help the participation of these children in academic learning. However, strangely, exclusion from learning was perceived as beneficial. I argue that this should not be used as justification for exclusionary practice. Indeed, it reflected how,

in a system which teachers and pupils felt reluctant to be part of, the rare chance to ‘escape’ the trap of performative culture became valuable.

There has been discussion of how certain groups of children could be excluded in performative school culture (e.g. Greenstein, 2016). However, the observations of disabled children on such schooling have not been documented to my knowledge. Schools’ commitment to raise all pupils’ attainments (except LRC pupils) might help to secure the participation in academic learning of all children regardless of their gender, ethnicity or socio-economic background. Nonetheless, the price was paid in shortage of space for relaxing and socialising among school members, which could impede the development of genuine interpersonal relationships: these being the key to learning about each child and dismantling the prescribed negative images of difference. Certainly, I admit that this finding must be located in its context of Shanghai’s high performing system: other systems might not be driven by pupils’ academic performances to such an extreme degree.

Overall, the child participants provided insightful and informative comments on the schooling provision, especially in regard to inclusive and exclusionary practices. They seemed to have clear ideas about how schools could be made better for them and all other children, which reaffirmed the potential implications of listening to pupil voice to inform the development of inclusive practice (further discussed in section 7.3.2).

### *Diversity*

Having positive relationships with teachers and peers was identified by the child participants as essential in their schooling experiences, a fact recognised by many researchers (e.g. Ainscow, 2007; Black-Hawkins et al., 2007; Cefai & Cooper, 2010; Michael & Frederickson, 2013). It was central to many aspects of children’s school lives, from opportunities to participate in learning and gaining sufficient support, to enjoyment of friendships and protection from bullying. A sense of community and of being treated as full members was repeatedly stressed by the child participants in explaining why a teacher was likeable, what made a lesson great and what they

enjoyed about going to school, on the basis of which I emphasise the importance of facilitating ‘togetherness’ among children and teachers.

The findings of disabled children’s experiences of the benefits from friendships appeared to be consistent with Male (2014)’s review such as a sense of company, security and equality in the relationships. The common type of peer interaction between disabled and non-disabled pupils observed in this research - ‘the helper and the helped’ - has also been identified frequently in research (Male, 2014). However as described in section 6.5.1, most child participants had less satisfying peer relationships at school. In particular, bullying indicated the imbalanced power relations among children. Teachers were likely to consider what was happening between children as independent of their own actions, which, I argue, was not helpful in promoting inclusion. For example, it is suggested that children who are perceived as falling outside the norm are more likely to be bullied at school (Thornberg, 2011), and teachers’ practices could reinforce marking out disabled children or silencing their voices. The child participants’ explanations for not reporting bullying to teachers aligned with MacDonald and Swart’s (2004) finding that negative responses from teachers could result in underreporting, which only further obstructed anti-bullying intervention. Teachers need to pay more attention to peer interactions, to recognise their important roles in mediating tensions and conflicts among children, and to facilitate opportunities of forging friendships (Male, 2014).

### 7.2.3 From sameness to difference

One specific issue in this research was that the child participants were not informed about their disability/LRC designation, so that, with learning difficulties less visible, children did not draw on the notion of disability to think about their lives. Being enrolled in regular schools like other children, the child participants might not even be aware of the placement in segregated institutions. Thus, by contrast with some western research in which disabled children engaged in deeper reflection on their disability identities and barriers to whole group participation (e.g. Kelly & Norwich, 2004; Lewis et al., 2005), the child participants would not necessarily attribute the treatment they received to provision for ‘disabled children’.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that disabled children were treated the same as others, as if the processes of marking these children as ‘disabled’, ‘special’ or ‘different’ were thus absent in regular schools. In Chinese schools, any explicit or subtle difference in the provision for a child could be exceptionally easy to detect. Indeed, the child participants were very much aware of any special and inequitable treatment directed at them in comparison to other pupils, such as sitting in ‘special’ seats in classrooms, which was noted by other researchers too (e.g. Mortier et al., 2011; Joshi, 2006). They were clear about the hidden ‘rules’ in schools such as the privileges of high-performing pupils. They have started to live between a regular world and a special world, as also found by Schauwer et al. (2009). Labelling a group of children as disabled/LRC pupils and prescribing special provision for them was likely to position these children as ‘different’ pupils, causing them to experience marginalisation and exclusion in everyday school life.

Special or additional provision is often naturally positioned as the most suitable approach to educating disabled children, reflecting the rationale of special education. In Chapter 3, I noted that the negative impacts such as stigma were conceptualised as an inevitable part of the ‘dilemma of difference’ in responding to student diversity (Norwich, 2010). This research found that in Chinese schools, the ‘benefits’ of special treatments failed to outweigh the negative effects on children’s school experiences: special provision seemed to be reproducing marginalisation and exclusion for disabled children in regular schools.

I need to clarify that in this research, there were two different stances underpinning special provision: one group of practices were devised with the intention of supporting disabled children’s academic learning through making necessary adjustments to learning materials and tasks; the other group of practices, while also justified as support strategies, instead served others’ interests more.

The former group of practices were recognised as helpful by the child participants, such as individualised tutoring from teachers and peers, which could help children overcome restrictions due to their impairments (Mortier et al., 2011). Also, I consider it problematic to demand that child participants reach certain academic standards at the sacrifice of all other aspects of their lives. These practices sometimes could entail

unwanted consequences, which brought conflicting feelings to children. For example, children might only be able to learn relevant skills in the separate resource classroom.

However, the child participants were particularly resistant to the special treatments that marked them out as different and inferior among peers. The prominent issue of negative labelling effects found in this research has rarely been mentioned and discussed in existing literature on the implementation of LRC. It should be especially noted that the ‘favour’ in which children hold resource classrooms should not be used by a child-centred discourse to justify such provision. I argue that the formation of such space exactly mirrors what is missing from regular classrooms. For example, Qi opted for the resource classroom because he was more respected there. As Ravet (2007) pointed out, the apparent disengagement of pupils actually acted as a solution for them. Thus, the questions that should be asked are: why can’t disabled children be treated equally in regular classrooms? What makes children lose interest in participation? After all, what’s wrong with regular education (Slee, 2011)?

Besides resistance to separation and differentiation, the child participants expressed their wish to stay together with peers and share equal opportunities. They showed great empathy towards their peers and also teachers: interestingly, they stressed the principle of fairness and a community’s needs beyond their individual interests or privileges. Also, in contrast with disabled children’s emphasis on independence or autonomy in Western literature (e.g. Blackman, 2011; Mortier et al., 2011), the child participants praised mutual support among children. Furthermore, as also assumed by Cefai and Cooper (2010), many of the child participants’ comments could be shared by other pupils as well.

These findings seem to reflect the cultural dimension of Chinese society that underlines interdependency and collectivism. However, it should not be ignored that children in other contexts could share similar aspirations. For instance, Asbjørnslett et al. (2014) found that social togetherness was essential to disabled children’s participation. When, in western literature, the process of moving towards inclusive education tends to promote community and interdependency (e.g. Greenstein, 2016), my research findings echoed LeTendre and Shimizu’s (2000) insights that in China, disabled children’s individual voices, which could be easily overlooked, needed to be

attended to by educators. However, diverging from LeTendre and Shimizu's (2000) ideas, I argue that expanding space for individuals should not be simply understood as introducing special provision for disabled children: the process of moving forward towards inclusion is far more complicated than such a quick solution. To make practice inclusive, I suggest that the commonalities of pupils' wants should be addressed to improve the provision for all, when flexible and reflexive adjustments are made to individual differences. This requires constant critical examination and evaluation of children's experiences with the fundamental intention of negotiating every child's learning and participation.

## 7.3 Learning from teachers

Like the children, teachers in this research offered great insights into the complex schooling process surrounding disabled children's inclusion in regular schools. I learned about their teaching practices, beliefs and rationales. The teachers' role was found to be extremely important, as was also recognised by the child participants.

### 7.3.1 Reinforcing exclusion and negotiating inclusion

In Chapter 6, I have described how teachers could either reinforce the marginalisation and exclusion of disabled children, or effectively negotiate these children's learning and participation in classrooms and schools.

For Chinese teachers, the idea of including disabled children seemed to be understood more as providing shelter and catering to their basic needs, out of sympathy and responsibility towards disadvantaged groups underpinned by Confucian thinking, which I acknowledge in some way helped to secure disabled children's access to regular schools. Teachers' practices thus carried a greater sense of 'caring', 'looking after' and 'protecting' these children, but with much less emphasis on learning, achieving and participating. Such charitable beliefs inevitably contributed to neglect of the need to provide quality education and equal opportunities for disabled children in regular schools, and thus was of little help in realising the goal of inclusion.

Teachers tended to justify the exclusionary practices by drawing on the interrelated notions of disabled children's incompetence and vulnerability to harm (the need for excessive protection). The powerful influence of the med-psycho model of disability was evident, which fortified the attribution of the child participants' difficulties in learning to impairments, something that was out of the teachers' realm to intervene with. This finding is convergent with Hart et al.'s (2004) discussion of the effects of ability-labelling on teachers' mindsets and practices. The performative school culture further reinforced the 'necessity' of sacrificing some children's learning in the interests of the majority, and restricted the space for teachers and disabled children to re-negotiate competence. Teachers' general lack of attentiveness to children's worlds resulted in ignorance of how their practices shaped what pupils encountered in their everyday school lives.

It is undeniable that all teachers faced many structural obstacles; for example, they struggled no less than pupils with the high-pressure performance agenda. Nevertheless, some teachers seemed to have more successfully negotiated inclusive classrooms for all pupils including the child participants. Certainly, teachers' inclusive practices in Chinese classrooms should be more carefully examined in future research. This research is able to gain several important insights based on the findings presented in section 6.4.3.

First, inclusive teachers see disabled children as equal beings with other pupils. They resist seeing these children through the lens of disability labels, which often implies the existence of fixed deficits and limitations in children's ability to participate. This is much in line with the principle of inclusive pedagogy (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) that teachers should reject deterministic beliefs and focus on children's potential to learn and achieve.

Second, inclusive teachers are committed to every child's learning and participation, rooted in professional and moral values. Teaching and learning in a classroom are seen as a collective process concerning everyone. Greater emphasis is put on being fair to all children and facilitating a sense of community. They seek resources, support and collaboration from within and beyond the community (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). The agendas of inclusion and achievement are not seen as



fundamentally incompatible (Black-Hawkins et al., 2007). This does not erase the possible difficulties and dilemmas involved in responding to children's diversity; nonetheless, the key lies in whether a teacher shows an explicit determination to keep negotiating space for all. Thus teachers actively explore, by trial-and-error, effective ways of learning about inclusive practice, as has been found by many researchers (Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick & West, 2012; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Shevlin, Winter & Flynn, 2013).

Most importantly, inclusive teachers are inclined to be informed by children's views and experiences when making decisions; they value children's contribution and promote children's voices. The teacher-pupil relationship is reciprocal. Through the practice of 'co-agency' (Hart et al., 2004), teachers allow themselves to learn from children – to be surprised, helped out and inspired by them – which enables teachers to ask questions and transform their beliefs and practices.

Although evidence of inclusive practice in Chinese classrooms was reaffirmed in this research, there was a tendency to impose special educational thinking and practices on regular teachers. Such thinking, as discussed in Chapter 2, was derived from a common belief that disabled children 'must' require different or special treatments at school (preferably from specialists), underpinned by disciplinary knowledge of medicine, psychology and special education. I am not disputing the relevance of many such supports, which could be very essential in disabled children's daily lives. Nevertheless, what this research suggested was that when special educators were positioned as the only experts and when special provision was perceived as the best and most suitable kind for disabled children – embodying the rise of 'expertism' as noted by Skidmore (2004) – there was a risk of undervaluing regular teachers' expertise in promoting all children's inclusion within regular classrooms. Their professional competence seemed to be challenged by the assumed lack of specialist knowledge, and the prevalence of such doubts could only add to these teachers' lasting concerns and reservations about the implementation of inclusive education.

Contextual difference, which could make the above interpretation more plausible, needs to be further stressed. This research found that older and more experienced teachers were more likely to demonstrate inclusive practice, which contrasts with

Shevlin et al.'s (2013) finding that these teachers tended to assign responsibility for SEN pupils to special educators. The possible reason is that in Western schools, the presence of special educators might have become a norm; thus it could be more challenging to transform regular teachers' beliefs towards re-recognising their responsibilities for all the pupils. However, as explained in Chapter 2, before the introduction of special provision into Chinese schools, regular teachers were expected to be responsible for all pupils who came into their classrooms. Thus the teachers in this research could have already identified inclusive practice through their years of exploration without being familiar with ideas derived from special education. Instead, it was young teachers who were more exposed to special educational thinking, being likely to support the notion that disabled children should be treated differently.

Therefore, I argue that there is a need for greater recognition of regular teachers' knowledge, pedagogy and expertise in realising inclusive education in regular classrooms. The 'secrets' of their practice, which might be hard to articulate, need to be researched, rather than being replaced by the adoption of special provision.

### **7.3.2 Revisiting pupil voice and inclusive practice**

In Chinese schools, it has not become common for teachers to learn with and from children. Nevertheless, the research findings suggested a significant link between pupil voice and inclusive practice: teachers who were more inclusive paid greater attention to children's views and experiences, and let their practices be informed by such knowledge; meanwhile children could also have much better schooling experiences. Teachers' attentiveness to children's worlds seemed to constitute a starting point: learning from the child participants, teachers were transformed towards exercising more inclusive values and practices. In section 3.4, I have listed five potential implications of pupil voice for developing inclusive practice:

- Making visible the facilitators of and barriers to learning and participation
- Facilitating reflective practice
- Challenging deterministic beliefs
- Fostering an inclusive culture
- Recognising existing and sustainable resources embedded in local contexts

In the following, I will revisit these propositions in light of what has been learned from the research findings.

### *Hearing authentic voices*

As discussed above, disabled children who participated in this research were able to identify the supports for and the barriers to their learning and participation. This confirmed the proposition, which has also been stressed by Messiou (2012), that eliciting children's views on schooling could greatly help to make the facilitators of and barriers to inclusion visible to teachers and schools. Based on the research findings, I intend to point out that the process of 'listening' is far more complex than merely 'asking about children's opinions'. In fact, children's responses might not reflect their true beliefs about where the barriers lie and what they want teachers or schools to change and improve. There are many challenges to meet to achieve the aim of hearing pupils' authentic voices.

First, compared to other pupils, disabled children's voices could be overlooked when teachers were not clear on how to consult these children. The common practice of pupil surveys might not be applicable, because disabled children tend to require a more individualised and attentive approach to elicit their views so that personal and sensitive topics could also be safely discussed. Given teachers' busy schedule, it might be unrealistic to expect them to carry out in-depth inquiries similar to this research. However, the experiences shared by teachers suggested that the observation, reflection and consultation of children's views could be embedded in everyday practice; 'listening' happens in teachers' daily interpersonal interactions with pupils.

Second, teachers need to be more aware of their own assumptions as to which pupils' voices are valid. It was found that teachers could still withdraw from consulting disabled children because of concern over their competence to speak for themselves.

It was also seen in this research that when multiple views from pupils were present, teachers were likely to value other pupils' voices over disabled children's, which resulted in unfairness and injustice towards these children.

Third, a tokenistic approach to pupil voice needs to be dismissed in order to gain pupils' trust. The act of listening is necessary but not sufficient. Teachers' and schools' inaction could only deepen the silence of pupil voice. Thus, in order to encourage and sustain the emergence of pupil voice, teachers and schools must take appropriate action in response to children's voices, rather than leaving their concerns, such as bullying, not responded to.

Fourth, this research also warned of the problematic approach of 'misusing' pupil voice to legitimise existing exclusionary practices. On the surface, pupil voice seemed to be used to inform practice with a child-centred discourse. For example, Snelgrove (2005) used the enjoyment of disabled children in resource classrooms to justify such provision: if children 'chose' the resource classroom, then what was wrong with it? However, teachers should critically interpret children's meanings rather than taking their words at a superficial and literal level. This research found that only children who were already marginalised in regular classrooms were likely to accept the provision of resource classrooms, which indicated that children's 'choices' were not real choices but compromises.

### *From reflective practice to reflexive practice*

This research found that teachers did draw on pupil voice to engage themselves with reflective practice, to the benefit of their professional development (Flutter, 2007). Besides this implication, I should note that listening to pupil voice is also necessary to support teachers in becoming reflexive practitioners (Davis & Watson, 2001), who are aware of how social reality, such as a disabled child's competence, is constructed through assumptions, meanings and interactions, and who retain sensitivity to their own role in the process of promoting inclusion. The increased awareness could enable teachers to explore and craft alternative ways of resolving difficulties, which moves teachers forward and away from maintaining exclusionary processes.

### *Constructing space for learning and achieving*

Listening to pupil voice, in a way, also means ‘learning about’ pupils. As found in this research, teachers could gain better knowledge of children’s characteristics, abilities and merits through close observation and daily interactions. Their deterministic beliefs about disabled children could thus be challenged. It is particularly important for teachers to resist the imposition of special educational thinking and practices, and not to take children’s ability differences as something pre-determined. Pupil voice could facilitate the construction of such a space, where teachers gain better understanding of a wider range of achievements, hold up high expectations for every child, and provide sufficient opportunities for disabled children without interrupting a sense of togetherness. Within such a space, pupils share with teachers a common understanding that they are competent to learn and achieve.

### *Practising ‘everyday’ inclusive education*

The research findings implied that where children’s voices were more respected, the communities also seemed to be more inclusive: fewer negative experiences of marginalisation and exclusion were reported and teachers and pupils enjoyed more positive and reciprocal relationships. Inclusive education thus constituted a culture which teachers and pupils lived in, experienced and contributed to on a daily basis. Through mutual sympathy and understanding, the division between adults’ and children’s worlds was blurred and the two were merged, both becoming more aware of how their own actions could influence others’ lives. Without embarking on the rhetoric of ‘inclusion’, teachers and pupils were actively and continuously ‘doing’ inclusive education and interrupting exclusionary processes. Practising ‘everyday’ inclusive education, I argue, is indeed reflected in decisions about many ‘trivial’ matters in children’s worlds: it is through tireless day-by-day and little-by-little negotiation that children’s inclusion and belongingness in class and school communities are facilitated and strengthened. To challenge the regularity, familiarity and ordinariness of school life, it is essential to involve the views of all stakeholders, especially pupils, in the search for new alternatives (Fielding & Rudduck, 2002).

### *Pupils as resources and persons*

Children's comments gathered through this research highlighted how pupil voice could be used as a precious resource to develop inclusive practice. Nevertheless, I further argue that seeking pupils as resources should not mean that children are only 'sources of information' with which to bring instrumental benefits for teachers and schools. This research identified a quite worrying issue that genuine interpersonal relationships among teachers and pupils were in danger in the performative school culture, where the value of a pupil or a teacher was appraised in terms of one's significance for the league tables. In particular, conversation between teachers and pupils only took place for the sake of performance. Relationships among school members were distorted, the personal being used for the functional (Fielding & Moss, 2011). I argue not only that what is measured in academic assessments cannot fully represent the richness of learning, but also that education should fundamentally concern dignity, wellbeing and ways of living together. Only by seeing pupils firstly as persons and equal partners in education can the affirmation and celebration of human diversity be cultivated and genuine relationships flourish, from which point understanding, acceptance, recognition and participation can take place.

In all, this research affirmed the implications and benefits of pupil voice for developing inclusive practice in classrooms and schools. Pupil voice, for its valuation of pupils as persons and resources, is integral to inclusive values. Listening to children, being considerate and respectful of their views, and transforming educational practice accordingly, should be embedded in everyday practices and interactions. By practising pupil voice, teachers could engage with school reality at a deeper level and explore effective approaches reflectively and reflexively. Through facilitating the positive cycle in which voices can emerge based on trust, and interrupting exclusionary processes, space for meaningful, collaborative and unrestricted learning could be extended.

### **7.4 Imagining inclusive schooling in China**

In Chapter 2, I pointed out that although the policy discourse of LRC had changed in response to the global advocacy of inclusive education, the extent to which disabled

children's inclusion was realised in everyday school life remained unknown. Policy-makers, practitioners and researchers also tend to be very pessimistic about including disabled children in regular schools, asserting an inherent gap between the ideal and the reality, as if regular schools in China could never be the right places for disabled children.

This research is able to significantly advance our understanding of the status of disabled children's inclusion in Chinese regular schools and the complex processes and issues involved. Disabled children's experiences of marginalisation and exclusion challenged the problematic practices in regular classrooms and the introduction of special provision such as resource classrooms, showing that there is indeed a long way to go before every child's learning and participation are promoted. Nevertheless, of equal importance, we should not dismiss the fact that inclusive practice was also present in Chinese regular classrooms, where teachers showed great commitment to negotiating all children's inclusion in spite of structural constraints. Such findings offered hopeful possibilities by opposing the misconception that quality education for disabled children could not be achieved in regular settings. I thus assert that, with the right effort by teachers and schools, disabled children can and should belong in regular classrooms and schools alongside their peers. If the notion of inclusive education has been missed out in the implementation of LRC, how can we move forward?

To ensure disabled children's inclusion in education, a paradigm shift in China is called for, moving away from current normative assumptions, premises and ways of operating in policies, practices and research related to LRC and inclusive education. Table 7.1 illustrates the key points of the paradigm shift that I am proposing.

Table 7.1 Paradigm shifting towards inclusive education in China

	Where we are	Where we should be going
Working language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Disciplinary terms from medicine, psychology and special education</li> <li>- Treat categories and labels as objective facts owned by children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Policy, practice and pedagogy of inclusive education</li> <li>- Be critical and reflexive of negative impacts of categorising and labelling</li> </ul>
See (disabled) children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adults-to-be</li> <li>- Incompetent and in need of protection</li> <li>- Differences as deficits to be normalised</li> <li>- Passive container for static knowledge</li> <li>- Receive ends of educational provision</li> <li>- Voices invalid and undervalued</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Being and becoming; Full persons</li> <li>- Competent social actors with agency; Active and constructivist learners</li> <li>- Recognition of differences as human diversity to be celebrated</li> <li>- Equal partners and resources for education development</li> <li>- Voices heard and acted to as decision-makers</li> </ul>
See regular teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Irrelevant for educating 'special' children</li> <li>- Incompetent to implement inclusive education in regular settings</li> <li>- Instruments to produce pupils' academic performances</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Persons who live with pupils in a community</li> <li>- Key actors who play important roles in every child's school life</li> <li>- Competent practitioners with expertise and transformative potential in realising inclusive education</li> </ul>
See special educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The only experts to work with 'special' children</li> <li>- Have the most 'right' knowledge of how to educate 'special' children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Collaborators across disciplines and sectors</li> <li>- Be aware of the negative impacts from dominant med-psycho model of disability embedded in special educational thinking and practices</li> </ul>
See inclusive education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Utopian, irrelevant and unachievable</li> <li>- Relying on structural factors</li> <li>- One form of special education for some children or a technical issue to solve some children's 'problems'</li> <li>- The assimilation of 'special' children into an intact system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Distinct from the notion of special education</li> <li>- A process as the means to its ends towards a shared vision of enhancing all children's learning and participation</li> <li>- Difference can be made in classroom and schools regardless of structural restrictions</li> <li>- Involving all stakeholders' collaboration including pupils</li> <li>- Transformed everyday school experience for all</li> </ul>



	Where we are	Where we should be going
Policy-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rhetoric usage of 'inclusive education' without coherent and clear conceptualisation</li> <li>- Imposing special educational thinking and practices</li> <li>- Lack of guidance and recognition for regular teachers' practices</li> <li>- Lack of effective assessment and helpful inspection on disabled children's status of inclusion and the provision directed at them</li> <li>- Inclusive education as an add-on task for teachers and schools</li> <li>- Leave the Confucian charitable thinking of disability and the performative school culture unquestioned</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Engage with the meaning of inclusive education</li> <li>- Incorporate pupil voice in developing inclusive schooling and practice</li> <li>- Avoid underplaying regular teachers' roles in negotiating all children's inclusion</li> <li>- Adopt rights-based approach to ensure all children's learning and participation</li> <li>- Explore ways of assessment and inspection to provide guidance for teachers</li> <li>- Inclusive education as fundamental to and an integral part of schooling</li> <li>- Counterbalancing structural and cultural barriers</li> </ul>
Practice development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positioning special provision as the best for 'special' children</li> <li>- Tokenistic approach to inclusive education and pupil voice</li> <li>- Highly performance-driven</li> <li>- 'Caring' without participation for disabled children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Develop inclusive practice and pedagogy through local-inquiry</li> <li>- Sustain transformation through pupil voice</li> <li>- Focus on everyday inclusive practice and interactions</li> <li>- Negotiate space for all children's achievement, wellbeing and diversity</li> <li>- Participation beyond protection</li> </ul>
Academic research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positivism paradigm</li> <li>- Research <i>on</i> children and teachers</li> <li>- Mostly on teachers' attitudes and structural factors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social constructivism and transformative paradigm; Interdisciplinary collaboration</li> <li>- Research <i>with</i> children and teachers</li> <li>- Promoting all stakeholders' perspectives especially children's</li> <li>- Exploring inclusive practice and pedagogy in classrooms and schools</li> </ul>

First of all, the working language, practices and knowledge-building within the paradigm need to break away from their foundations in traditional disciplinary knowledge derived from medicine, psychology and special education, which could entail the unwanted consequence of furthering disabled children's marginalisation, as found in this research. To transform current schooling, a shared vision of inclusive education should be firmly adhered to as enhancing all children's schooling experiences in terms of learning, achievement, participation, wellbeing, dignity and belonging. How inclusion is negotiated in local contexts should be examined, especially teachers' experiences, insights, wisdom and experimentation with effective inclusive practice, to avoid simply copying and imposing what is believed to be a superior model of provision for disabled children.

Seeing all teacher participants' potential for transformation, I consider inclusive education as both a necessary ideal and a never-ending dynamic process. I argue that inclusive education can never be achieved by a tokenistic approach, but has to be practised, exercised and experienced in our day-to-day interactions, through genuine, reciprocal and collaborative relationships among school members. It fundamentally requires everyone, including children and teachers, to work together for a meaningful life. While acknowledging the positive influence of humanitarian values in Confucian culture, such as kindness and benevolence, for developing inclusive education in China, I also note that adopting a rights-based approach is necessary to counteract the potentially oppressive effects of a charitable model of disability. Conducted in a high-performing education system, this research, by identifying the impacts of performative school culture, might provide useful insights for other countries too, as this issue has become globally pressing, given the increasing international competition among student performances.

Children have given notes to many important things about our schooling, such as why achievement should be understood in a broader sense beyond academic attainments, and how essential it is to foster positive relationships. Their aspirations have said much about what inclusive education should involve and how it could be approached. It is teachers and pupils working together to make 'everyday' inclusive education happen that can secure a space in the suffocating performative culture –

fostering another way of being and living to replace the lives in which pupils and teachers compete with and exclude each other. Therefore, based on what I learned from this research, I attempt to formulate a working model for moving forward towards inclusive education in the context of China, with pupil voice as the core starting point (Figure 7.1).

In this model, teachers' and children's agency to negotiate inclusion in their everyday school lives and their openness to transformation as beings and becomings are recognised. Given teachers' significant roles in hearing and acting upon pupil voice, as I found in this research, I argue that the implications of pupil voice could not be realised without teachers. Thus, the interactive and interdependent relationship between teachers and pupils acts as the centre in place of a conception of the two groups as irrelevant actors living in separate worlds. It is through such a relationship that a transformation of practice and experiences can be sustained.

Four elements are involved in a cycle enabling pupil voice to emerge and inform practice development: teachers need to gain pupils' trust to encourage the emergence of authentic voices; effective supports are required to make it possible to hear every child without silencing some; children's voices need to be fully recognised by teachers; and actions informed by pupil voice must be taken, to reassure children about the significance of their views.

Children thus are seen as competent and equal partners alongside teachers, working and exploring together for better schooling experiences in class and school communities. Through this cycle, the opportunities to counterbalance the exclusionary processes and move towards enhanced learning and participation could be expanded. In the context of China, pupil voice could enable teachers to challenge the imposed special educational thinking and practices, seek space for inclusion in the highly performative and competitive school culture, and reduce the oppressive effects of Confucian charitable beliefs. Meanwhile, attending to pupil voice could powerfully remind teachers of what is meaningful for children's lives; that schooling is not only about academic performance, but also about friendships, happiness and opportunities to achieve and participate. Teachers' partnership with pupils is an essential step towards better collaboration, belonging and togetherness in

communities. If genuine and reciprocal relationships can flourish among teachers and pupils, diversity can be truly valued and celebrated.

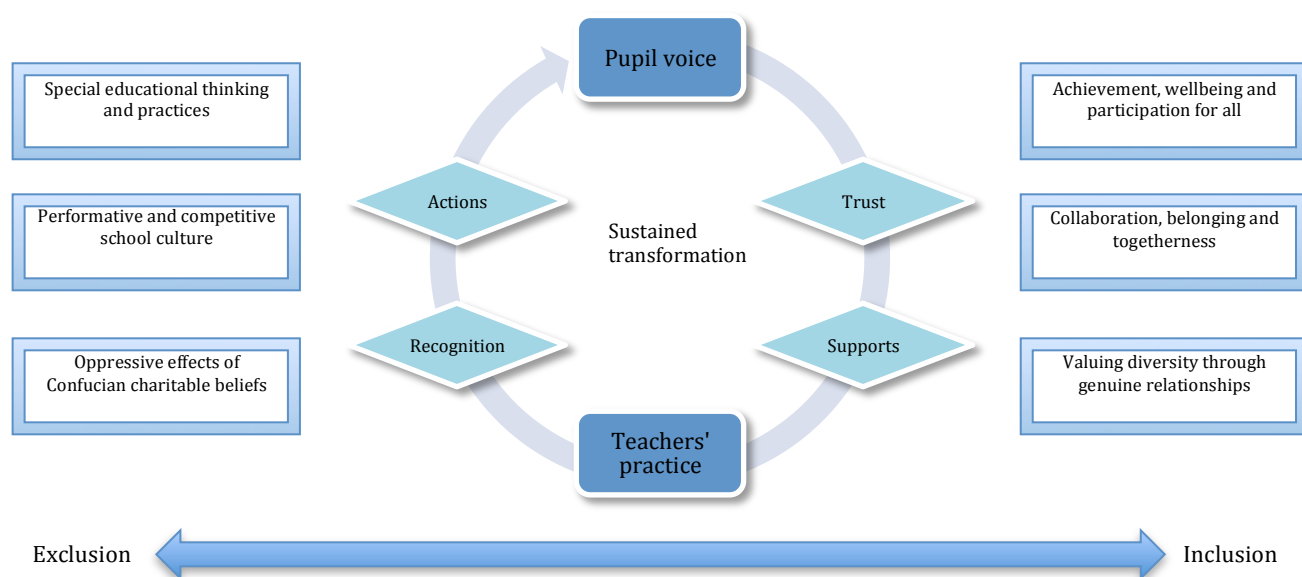


Figure 7.1 The working model for inclusive education in China

## 7.5 Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the meaning of the research findings. I started with a review of what has been learned from children and teachers respectively. The research affirmed the importance and relevance of listening to pupil voice. Children's views and experiences added significantly to a richer understanding of the schooling process, indicating what inclusive schooling should be like. Children's reports of negative experiences of marginalisation and exclusion showed that much needed to be done to realise inclusive education in everyday school life. Meanwhile, the research also highlighted teachers' roles in negotiating disabled children's learning and participation. Besides setting out several key insights into inclusive practice, I also warned of a tendency to downplay teachers' expertise and knowledge of promoting all children's inclusion in regular classrooms. While reaffirming the propositions formulated in Chapter 3 regarding the implications of pupil voice for inclusive practice, I further unpacked and discussed the complex issues involved. Based on the research findings, I argued that in China a paradigm shift moving forward towards inclusive education is urgently required. Finally, I proposed a

working model for inclusive education in the context of China, positioning pupil voice as the core starting point. Four elements – trust, supports, recognition and actions – are essential to sustain transformation through the reciprocal relationship between pupils and teachers.

## Chapter 8 Conclusion

Dear sister, we miss you! We have not seen you for a long time. We think of you. Your arrival for us is like the sun shining on the tender grass. Every minute we have spent with you was so precious. My classmates and I do not have much time left to be together. I am going to secondary! I will miss the life with the classmates and you. Now I see it going away. This is what I have written down before going to the secondary school.

– A message left by Dan after fieldwork

### 8.1 Introduction

Driven by personal and academic interests, I conducted an inquiry into the current status of disabled children's learning and participation in regular schools in China, using ethnographic approach. In this thesis, I first introduced the research context of China and Shanghai in Chapter 2, examining the historical development of education for disabled children and the implementation of LRC. Through this examination I identified the gaps in knowledge – the silence of disabled children's voices and the lack of deeper understanding of the everyday schooling process that shapes their inclusion and exclusion. Then in Chapter 3, before formulating the main research questions, I reviewed relevant debates about inclusive education, and argued that disabled children's voices should be listened to for their emancipatory benefits and their pedagogical implications for inclusive practice. In Chapter 4, I discussed methodological considerations, especially regarding how to realise 'researching with children', and introduced the research design and the way reflexivity, ethics and trustworthiness were addressed. I continued to illustrate how the research data were collected and analysed systematically in Chapter 5. The research findings and interpretations were presented in Chapter 6 following the structure of the *Framework for Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). Then in Chapter 7, I further examined what the research findings meant in relation to existing literature and theoretical ideas, and I discussed how inclusive education could be approached in China through a paradigm shift and the practice of pupil voice.

To conclude the thesis, I will first briefly summarise the main findings and arguments of this research as they serve to answer the research questions, following which I will review the limitations of this study. Section 8.4 provides a discussion of

the original contributions to current knowledge provided by this research. In section 8.5, I articulate the implications for future research, policy and practice. This chapter ends with concluding remarks and personal reflections.

## 8.2 Summary of the main findings and discussions

This research explored the school lives of 11 disabled children (labelled as having learning difficulties and designated as LRC pupils) in 4 state primary schools in urban Shanghai. Their teachers – 10 class teachers and 3 resource teachers – were also recruited as participants, being the significant adults for them in schools. Rich and contextual data were collected from fieldwork, by carrying out participant observation, interviews and participatory activities. Careful consideration was necessary throughout the research process to ensure that the representation of and insights into the schooling process were gained reflexively and ethically. Next, I will weigh the main findings and discussions against the research questions in turn.

*Research question 1: How do disabled children (designated as LRC pupils) understand, experience and negotiate their learning and participation in regular schools in Shanghai?*

First of all, through researching *with* children, I found the child participants to be very observant and sensitive, actively making sense of the circumstances they were living in, and capable of sharing invaluable comments on the current provision, the supports that were helpful and the present barriers to their learning and participation. Such findings surely add to the assertion from empirical research on disabled children's voices that these children could and should act as their own gatekeepers (e.g. Cefai & Cooper, 2010; Davis & Watson, 2000; Mortier et al., 2011).

All child participants identified positive and negative experiences in various aspects of their school lives. The experiences of inclusion or exclusion were contingent and highly dependent on specific situations, as also found by Davis (2007) and Adderley et al. (2015). Although a few children appeared to have satisfying schooling experiences, the frequent reports of marginalisation and exclusion suggested that disabled children's learning and participation were not fully realised in the participating schools with the implementation of LRC.

Although all child participants' access to regular schools was secured, they encountered restricted opportunities to access regular classrooms, the regular and complete curriculum, extra-curricular activities, and spaces in classrooms and schools. Children made sense of teachers' decisions to limit their participation by referring to the lower expectations of their competence, which could also influence their self-perception. The issues of narrowed curriculum and inhibited mobility applied to all pupils, including disabled children. Nevertheless, the child participants were particularly subject to the negative impacts of losing spaces in which to celebrate their interests, skills and achievements, and chances to participate in learning and socialising with peers.

The child participants stressed the importance of learning together with peers and teachers, and gaining support from them. However, some issues were prominent, such as children's vulnerability to being marginalised or excluded in group learning and subject to power relations with peer supporters. The impacts of the performative school culture were evident as the child participants could also exclude other children based on ability differences. In addition, children also noticed teachers' absence due to their busy schedules. Moreover, the quality of collaboration among teachers and the relationship between teachers and families in communities could also shape the child participants' schooling experiences.

Children were found to recognise their own responsibilities in learning, and their fluid learner identities across different classrooms highlighted the need for certain conditions in learning environments. However, besides the challenges stemming from their intellectual impairments, difficulties were reinforced by exclusionary practices, which were justified by the assumption of disabled children's incompetence, as noted by many researchers (e.g. Davis & Watson, 2001; Martin & Franklin, 2010). In the performative school culture, in which the child participants witnessed the lack of relaxing and socialising time for teachers and pupils, exclusion was further strangely perceived as entailing wellbeing benefits for the child participants. Children's 'opting out' could thus be derived from their resistance to the selective and competitive schooling process.



The relationships with teachers and peers were central to the child participants' schooling experiences, as recognised widely by researchers (e.g. Ainscow, 2007; Black-Hawkins et al., 2007; Cefai & Cooper, 2010; Michael & Frederickson, 2013). They emphasised the sense of community and togetherness, and the children's treatment as full members. However, very few children had chances to enjoy the companionship, encouragement and protection of friendships. All child participants reported bullying experiences and could be rather disappointed at teachers' inaction, which as MacDonald and Swart (2004) mentioned, could result in underreporting.

Moreover, although the child participants did not draw on the notion of disability to make sense of their situations, they experienced a process that marked them out as special and different. Some of the arrangements were found to be helpful, while often they were exposed to negative labelling effects and stigma by the deployment of special treatment, which they were keenly alert to, as also found by researchers (e.g. Mortier et al., 2011; Joshi, 2006). Although children might 'prefer' resource classrooms, their choices were more like compromises adopted to make up for what was missing from the regular classrooms. The child participants saw themselves as part of the group of pupils, and valued collective and community interests over their own, acting on the principle of 'fairness' for all. This finding indicated the importance of responding to the commonalities of pupils' wishes while not overlooking individual voices.

Disabled children's participation in decision-making was still limited and there was a lack of trust and spaces for hearing their voices. Children exercised their agency to negotiate their circumstances in various possible ways, and expressed their resistance to the exclusionary process. These views and experiences, which were often different from those of teachers (McCluskey et al., 2013; Schauwer et al., 2009), could tremendously enrich the understanding of school reality and inform the development of practice. The trivial matters in children's worlds should be recognised, enabling them to act as equal partners in the improvement of inclusive schooling.

*Research question 2: How do teachers, being significant adults for children, perceive and negotiate the learning and participation of disabled children (designated as LRC pupils)?*

As recognised by the child participants, teachers, as the key decision-makers, were found to play critical roles in shaping disabled children's inclusion and exclusion in regular schools.

The acceptance of disabled children in regular schools was underpinned by the humanitarian benevolence of Confucian thinking towards disadvantaged groups, in that teachers' practices were more about 'caring', with much less recognition of disabled children's rights to learn and participate. The influence of disability labels was powerful in reinforcing teachers' assumptions of disabled children's incompetence and need for protection, a finding aligned with Hart et al.'s (2004) argument. Disabled children's difficulties in learning thus were attributed to their impairments and their marginalised positions among peers tended to be rationalised by teachers. In addition, the introduction of special educational thinking and practices into regular schools encouraged teachers to devise special treatments for disabled children. The marginalisation of these children's learning was also furthered by the performative school culture, which pressured teachers to make 'realistic' choices.

In spite of the structural obstacles in current schooling, some teachers did demonstrate more effective inclusive practice. Sharing similarities with the conceptualisation of inclusive pedagogy (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), teachers were seen to resist deterministic beliefs and rather to focus on children's potential. They were highly committed to all children's learning and participation, emphasising professional development and cultivating a sense of community. In particular, they were attentive to children's worlds. They embedded children's views and experiences in their daily practice to inform educational decisions and transform their perceptions. They learned from children and valued pupils' contributions. Nevertheless, regular teachers' expertise, knowledge and professional competence seemed to be endangered by the overt upholding of special educators as the only experts able to provide quality education for disabled children.

Derived from the link between listening to children and teachers' effective practices, the research findings first confirm the five propositions (in Chapter 3) on the implications of pupil voice for the development of inclusive practice: making visible the facilitators of and barriers to learning and participation; facilitating reflective practice; challenging deterministic beliefs; fostering an inclusive culture; and recognising existing and sustainable resources embedded in local contexts. But they also suggest more nuanced consideration of these propositions. First, the process of hearing pupils' authentic voices could entail many challenges, including the need for more individualised methods for listening to disabled children, the bias in deciding whose voices are valid, the question of how to gain pupils' trust, and the problematic usage of pupil voice to justify exclusionary practice. Second, reflective practice is necessary but not sufficient for realising inclusive education. Listening to pupil voice could enable teachers to be more reflexive in their daily practices by exploring alternative ways rather than maintaining marginalisation and exclusion. Third, pupil voice could help teachers to construct a space where they could gain a much better understanding of diversity in achievement, retain high expectations for every child, and facilitate a sense of togetherness. Fourth, through the practice of pupil voice, the worlds of teachers and pupils could become merged in an enhanced interdependency within a community. Inclusive education is realised in everyday life through day-by-day negotiation. Finally, children should be fully respected as persons as well as resources. As argued by Fielding and Moss (2011), the functional should serve the personal. Genuine interpersonal relationships are essential to a true affirmation and celebration of human diversity.

*Research question 3: What are the facilitators of and barriers to their learning and participation?*

This research highlighted how teachers could make a real difference to disabled children's inclusion in regular schools, as has been illustrated above. Three main barriers to disabled children's learning and participation in the participating schools were evident. First, the imposition on regular schools of special educational thinking and practices, with their 'good intention' of supporting disabled children's inclusion, instead reinforced the marginalisation and exclusion of these children by positioning

them as incompetent, in need of protection, and different. Second, the prevailing performative and competitive school culture not only legitimised the unawareness of disabled children's learning, but also restricted the space for teachers to develop inclusive practice and to cultivate genuine relationships among teachers and pupils. Third, although to some extent the charitable model of disability in Confucian culture facilitated the acceptance of disabled children, its oppressive effects in underplaying disabled children's rights to participation should not be overlooked.

Based on the research findings, I argued that a paradigm shift was needed in China to challenge the dominant assumptions and discourses that impeded the implementation of inclusive education (Table 7.1). For example, the negative impacts of special provision, under the implementation of LRC, must be critically examined. To counterbalance the performative culture, children and also teachers should be accepted as full persons from the outset. Pupils' voices should be listened to and acted upon, and teachers need to recognise their impacts on children's everyday school lives. Quality collaboration towards a shared vision should be promoted among members of the class and school communities and the possibility of realising inclusive education in regular classrooms must be affirmed. To help teachers and schools in China to make use of pupil voice to develop inclusive practice, I formulated a working model, which positions the reciprocal relationship between pupils and teachers as the centre (Figure 7.1). Through addressing the four elements – trust, supports, recognition and actions – in a dynamic cycle, the implications of pupil voice could be amplified.

### 8.3 Limitations of the study

The limitations of the current research should be acknowledged. The first limitation, I consider, is that the research has not adopted a participatory, collaborative or action research approach but remained a consultative research on pupil voice. I recognise the huge potential for advancing our knowledge if children take up leading roles to research their own lives or if teachers could elicit their pupils' views by themselves. However, the compromise was made, first, because of my position as a student researcher and an outsider to the participating schools, which inevitably added to the unlikelihood of creating a research plan that would require more cooperation from

schools and potentially interrupt schools' routines, schedules and regulations. Also, because I was obliged to avoid causing further negative labelling effects for the child participants due to disability stigma, it would have been unethical to conduct this research in anything other than a discreet and less intrusive way. I reckon that the children and teachers who participated in this research made their best efforts and offered sufficient opportunities for me to learn from them.

In addition, there are some regrets over having been unable to represent some pupils' views and experiences. There were children who might have wanted to participate in this research, but were unable to do so solely because teachers or parents did not give consent, which exactly reflected how the voices of children, especially the most vulnerable, could be readily silenced when under adult control. I consider it impossible to waive the likelihood that some adults, by preventing children from taking part, actually were protecting their own interests such as the wish to conceal problematic treatment of children. This is certainly a continued dilemma for child researchers to grapple with. Another regret is that during my fieldwork, I observed many other pupils who were facing marginalisation and exclusion, such as autistic children, children with physical impairments, migrant children, and children with challenging behaviours or mental health issues, whose voices were not included. In fact, teachers admitted that children with learning difficulties might not be seen as the greatest 'problems' for schools. Inclusive education should make it right for every child. Thus a question is proposed for researchers: How can we listen to and be informed by 'all' children?

## 8.4 Contributions to knowledge

This research has made several important contributions to knowledge. First, by providing an alternative representation to that of the existing literature on the inclusion of disabled children in Chinese education, this research significantly contributes to a much deeper and comprehensive understanding of the current status of disabled children's learning and participation in Chinese regular schools, and the policies, practices and beliefs that underpin the process.

As reviewed in Chapter 2, although the policy of LRC has been implemented for over 25 years and is rhetorically becoming more consistent with the international advocacy of inclusive education, little is known about the extent to which disabled children are given sufficient opportunities to learn and participate alongside peers in regular schools. In particular, disabled children's voices have been largely missed out in academic research. Surveys of teachers' attitudes (e.g. Deng & Zhu, 2007; Ma & Tan, 2010) have shed light on the resistance of regular schools to accepting disabled children. Pessimism and disbelief prevail over the possibility of realising inclusion for these children, with much research only arriving at conclusions that iterate structural issues such as shortage of resources or large class sizes (e.g. Tan, 2014). The failure to provide relevant and useful insights into how inclusion could be promoted in disabled children's everyday school lives, I believe, was mainly due to the restricted paradigm of how to understand and gain knowledge, a lack of recognition of disabled children as competent social actors, and a reductionist tendency in researching schooling within the country, while international researchers could further face the challenges of accessing the inner world of Chinese schools and balancing research relations with teachers and children.

By locating the current inquiry in a theoretical and methodological framework which differentiates inclusive education from special education, recognises the significance and relevance of disabled children's voices, embraces a qualitative, ethnographic and reflexive approach, and makes use of my insider's perspective on Chinese education, I can provide a trustworthy analysis of the complex schooling process in which various pull-and-push factors were seen to be shaping disabled children's inclusion and exclusion. As presented in Chapters 6 and 7, the children and the teachers in this research offered invaluable insights into the facilitators of and barriers to inclusive education in the Chinese context.

Given the evidence of disabled children's experiences of marginalisation and exclusion in regular schools, the realisation of inclusive education clearly has a long way to go in China. The research challenges the dominant medical and charitable models of disability in the Chinese social and cultural context, and argues for an interactive view with which to understand disabled children's educational difficulties,

a view which not only dismantles a deterministic account of competence, but also reveals the importance of recognising teachers' role in negotiating children's learning and participation and helping them to develop inclusive practice in classrooms and schools. Disabled children's resistance to special provision, along with the threat posed to regular teachers' expertise, question the current uncritical promotion and expansion of special educational thinking and practice by academics and policy-makers, which simply assumes that different treatment is the ultimate solution in educating disabled children (e.g. Shen et al., 2008; Yu et al., 2011).

Nevertheless, while not ignoring the existing exclusion in schools, this research also avoided a solely dismissive perspective, but actively identified and highlighted the effective inclusive practice existing in Chinese regular classrooms, which promoted all pupils' learning and participation. The evidence for hope and potential progress could powerfully counter the misconception that inclusion is only a utopian ideal, and the tendency to attribute difficulties to a shortage of specialist knowledge. The description of regular teachers' inclusive practice provided in this research could illuminate future research on this topic. The paradigm shift I called for should be helpful in shedding light on how to move forward towards inclusive education in China.

What are the implications of this research for the international literature on inclusive education? The research findings, as discussed in Chapter 7, present much convergence with research conducted in other contexts. The research does indicate that inclusive education needs to be practised in everyday school lives beyond the presence of such terminology in policy texts. As it is likely to be contested (Barton, 1997; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Slee, 2011), it requires a clear and coherent conceptualisation, in particular breaking away from the rationale of special education and integration (Allan & Slee, 2008; Armstrong & Barton, 2007; Vislie, 2003). The continuing exclusion of disabled children and the resilience of special education observed in this research are not unique to China, but constitute a common issue that needs to be struggled with. Although Chinese teachers also encountered dilemmas and tensions, this research found that those who adopted a firmly inclusionist stance tended to negotiate more space for all children, thus questioning the usefulness of the

dilemmatic approach (Norwich, 2013), especially when special provision tends to cause more negative impacts in Chinese schools. The introduction of special educational thinking and practices in China has been inevitably influenced by western schooling models; however, its problematic effects warned policy-makers of the importance of exploring strategies through local inquiry in developing countries (Srivastava et al., 2015; Thomas, 2013), enabling pupils and teachers to unpack and examine approaches that would respond to their concerns in connection with their cultural beliefs and social contexts.

Furthermore, since Shanghai was chosen as the research site, the research also generated great insight into how disabled children's inclusion was shaped in a performative school culture. It offered these children's first-hand experiences of and views on this issue, which has been less reported in empirical research despite much on-going discussion of its critical effects on education globally (Ball, 2013). The research highlighted the need to engage such a prominent issue in the discussion of inclusive education in order to transform schooling, rather than 'including' children in an education system that serves instrumental goals at the price of enjoyment, collaboration, achievement, sense of meaningfulness and genuine interpersonal relationships in communities.

The research, for being closely grounded in the schooling context of China, also gained many interesting insights which seemed to be culturally significant, such as the two-sided effects of Confucian beliefs or the emphasis on interdependency, community and collective interests in schools. The accommodation of local contextual variations, I argue, is necessary for the international implementation of inclusive education, if possible 'routes' to inclusion are to be identified. Meanwhile, it is also essential to recognise that, across borders, what teachers and children desire for schooling share a remarkable consistency. As stated already, it should not be assumed that inclusive education is more 'advanced' in Northern contexts and 'underdeveloped' everywhere else – what is needed is 'learning from each other' for the sake of a common vision.

Second, this research has managed to explore the implications of listening to pupil voice for promoting inclusive practice in classrooms and schools, the issue of which



is under-researched in international literature because pupils are often not perceived as eligible partners in the improvement of schooling. Building on the growing body of research that focuses on children's perspectives on inclusive education, this research provided a more explicit articulation of how to listen to pupil voice and what might hinder the process. It reaffirmed that disabled children should be respected as active and competent social actors, who could provide critical comments on the schooling provision. The discussion in this research underlined the much less straightforward process of hearing children's authentic voices so as to make facilitators and barriers visible. It showed how the practice of pupil voice could facilitate reflective and reflexive practice and how the space for children's learning and achieving could thus be expanded. The research suggested that pupil voice should be seen as an integral part of inclusive education to be embedded in everyday interactions. Pupils should be seen as persons and resources who can contribute tremendously to the development of inclusive education in schools. Focusing on day-to-day sustained transformation, I proposed a working model with pupil voice as the core starting point, which could be used by teachers and schools to collaborate with their own students in decision-making on daily practice.

Third, this research contributes to the methodological knowledge of researching inclusive education and disabled children's voices in Chinese schools. It is noticeable that disabled children's voices are still likely to be unheard even in pupil voice research, on the assumption that they could not participate due to their impairments. I experimented with several participatory and innovative methods and paid great attention to respecting children's rights and agency and balancing power relations, an approach which proved to be engaging, productive and fruitful in enabling children with intellectual challenges to share their views and experiences. Also, this research showed that the *Framework for Participation* (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) could be used as an effective research tool in researching issues of inclusion in schools. The framework, although developed in the North, could be used flexibly to cater to specific research focuses and schooling contexts, because of its openness and its purpose of gauging the questions asked rather than imposing fixed answers. Thus I suggest that the framework should be helpful for academic and practitioners' inquiries in China and potentially other contexts as well. Moreover, the adaption and

employment of this framework, and the rich insights generated through this inquiry not only expand the scope of its application, but also inform its future development, such as including and highlighting pupils' perspectives and experiences of inclusion.

Finally, this research provided valuable experiences and insights into how to research the issue of disability in China, which has been frequently reported by Chinese and international researchers as replete with difficulties and obstacles (e.g. Deng & Holdsworth, 2007; Kohrman, 2005; Potts, 2000; Stone, 1997). Through a transparent and honest documentation of the research process, encompassing the clash between western ethical procedures and local interpretations, how to negotiate access to institutions and how to manage field relations and minimise negative labelling effects, the study should be helpful for fellow researchers. I assert that the above methodological contributions are overall very important for promoting disabled children's inclusion in Chinese education.

## 8.5 Implications for future research, policy and practice

This exploratory research, by identifying relevant issues surrounding the inclusion of disabled children in regular schools, provides crucial insights for future research. Many specific topics deserve to be further examined in greater depth, such as the negative effects of labels of disability/SEN, impacts of special provision such as resource classrooms and peer supporting strategies, collaboration between regular and special educators, bullying of disabled children and interventions, tensions between inclusive education and the performative school culture, and the underlying cultural process<sup>42</sup>. To closely follow up this inquiry, I consider the proposals below as necessary priorities.

First, as already mentioned, a paradigm shift is needed for researching inclusive education in China. Repeated questionnaire surveys of teachers' attitudes, summaries of the basic state of LRC implementation based on scarce empirical evidence, and the general lack of critical perspectives on policy and practice, are of little help in realising inclusive education in children's everyday school lives. Boundaries of

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<sup>42</sup> For instance, Hwang (2009) offered a very interesting account of a sibling's experiences of living with autistic children in Korea from a cultural studies perspective.

research paradigms and disciplines need to be crossed in order to see children and teachers as the experts and agents of schooling, rather than as passive objects to be researched and guided by detached researchers. As reflected in the methodology, qualitative, participatory and action research with pupils, teachers and schools should be encouraged and valued, rather than dismissed as ‘unscientific’. In addition, it would be interesting to examine how teachers could use the proposed working model of pupil voice, and its effectiveness and limitations.

Second, Chinese teachers’ inclusive practice and pedagogy should be further explored. Indeed, teachers expect more relevant suggestions for their everyday practices. The existing inclusive practice, knowledge and expertise should be valued, underlined and articulated, to resist the impacts of special educational thinking and also contribute to teacher education in China. Cross-country and comparative research on this subject could also facilitate knowledge exchange and collaboration for the global development of inclusive education.

In this research, the implementation of LRC has been found helpful in the following aspects: it has raised a general awareness of disability issues in regular schools; through it, financial, educational and medical supports can be arranged for disabled children and families; disabled children’s access to regular schools can be legally protected, and the transition between primary and junior secondary school is secured. Nevertheless, although it adopts strategies such as opening resource classrooms in the name of promoting disabled children’s inclusion in regular schools, this research has shown that there were several problems that must be addressed by policy-makers: the evaluation of LRC’s policy effects should include children’s, parents’ and teachers’ perspectives along with field observation of schooling practices; the accompanying and unwanted consequences of implementing LRC must be critically examined, such as the stigma on disabled children it generates; the imposition of special educational thinking and practices should be avoided in favour of actively engaging with the idea and language of inclusive education, which in turn should be clearly conceptualised; real examples and models of inclusive practice should be collected and shared with teachers and schools; effective ways of assessing disabled children’s progress in learning should be sought; inclusive education should not be

positioned as a ‘technical’ solution for some children but rather should support schools in responding to every pupil through transformed practice; and a rights-based approach to disabled children’s learning and participation should be adopted.

In terms of practice development, there are several points that could be stressed: teachers and schools should respect pupils as equal partners in improvement; teachers’ role in realising inclusive education must be given due prominence; collaboration is needed between regular and special educators; existing teacher development strategies such as ‘lesson study’ could be made use of to enable teachers to explore inclusive practice together; school leaders can effectively facilitate the ethos of inclusion to secure space in the performative culture; and teacher training should integrate perspectives of inclusive education to support teachers to respond to student diversity in classrooms better.

As widely advocated by child researchers, disseminating research to a wider range of stakeholders is an important ethical practice bringing real benefits and changes to children’s lives (Gallagher, 2009c; Lewis & Porter, 2004). By challenging the current problematic provision of LRC through dissemination, this research could have the potential to not to serve the purpose of maintaining the status quo (Fielding, 2004b). After completing the research, apart from publishing in academic journals, I intend to engage with policy-makers, practitioners, families and children: suggestions and recommendations will be made to the policy-making of LRC; examples and advice on inclusive practice will be shared with teachers and schools; research findings will be introduced to disabled children’s families through NGOs, parents’ associations or social media (e.g. ‘Weibo’ or ‘WeChat’); child-friendly leaflets with accessible language could be made for school pupils (Walmsley, 2010), to introduce the ideas underlying inclusive classrooms. To protect participants’ identities (Graham, Powell, Taylor, Anderson & Fitzgerald, 2013), certain strategies will be used to further anonymise them, such as removing information that might indicate their demographic details.

## 8.6 Epilogue

This thesis has reported an ethnographic research I conducted with a group of disabled children and their teachers in primary schools in Shanghai concerning their views and experiences of current schooling under the implementation of LRC. It provided an in-depth description and interpretation of the complex schooling processes that shaped disabled children's learning and participation in Chinese regular schools. The relevance of children's voices in informing the development of inclusive practice was stressed. The research makes important contributions to the knowledge of inclusive education for disabled children in China and draws essential implications for future research, policy and practice.

This inquiry started with a simple speculation that arose when I was working in segregated institutions for disabled people several years ago: What if they were not here but together with us? What I have learned has been tremendously rich, and the most valuable lesson is how hard but how important it is to pose questions about what is taken for granted and why what we do matter to others' lives and thus to our own. Indeed, it might have been a cost-efficient option to omit disabled children's voices given the existing methodological and practical challenges. Nevertheless, I would not by that means have been able to gain invaluable insights into the possibilities of better ways of living. Children's wishes reminded me what education should be about and teachers taught me how a difference could be made by day-to-day effort. We are all part of this never-ending journey, which continues as long as we keep imagining.

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## Appendices

### Appendix - A: Statistics of Chinese special education system

Year	Students in Special Education	Sp Schools*	Students in Sp Schools	Students in Sp Classes**	Students in Reg Classes***	Students in Reg Classes (Primary)	Students in Reg Classes (Secondary)	Rate of Students in Reg Classes (%)
1949	2,000	42						
1957	7,538	66						
1960	26,701	479						
1965	22,850	266						
1966	22,800	226						
1975	26,782	246						
1976	28,500	269						
1981	33,477	302						
1987	52,876	505						
1997	340,621	1,440	112,078		228,543	215,114	13,429	67.70
1998	358,372	1,535	115,259		243,113	225,191	17,922	67.84
1999	371,625	1,520	115,477		256,148	233,196	22,952	68.93
2000	377,599	1,539	117,717		259,882	233,135	26,747	68.82
2001	386,360	1,531	110,165	6,276	269,919	230,503	39,416	69.86
2002	374,457	1,540	118,747	5,637	250,073	202,992	47,081	66.78
2003	364,740	1,551	123,169	5,160	236,411	190,324	46,087	64.82
2004	371,813	1,560	128,843	5,025	237,945	190,486	47,459	64.00
2005	364,409	1,593	134,362	4,557	225,490	182,072	43,418	61.88
2006	362,946	1,605	141,127	4,700	217,119	172,139	44,980	59.82
2007	412,183	1,618	140,133	5,026	267,024	200,430	66,594	64.78
2008	409,561	1,640	145,459	4,797	259,305	188,831	70,474	63.31
2009	419,459	1,672	150,296	4,657	264,506	187,650	76,856	63.06
2010	425,613	1,706	166,012	3,939	255,662	180,538	75,124	60.07
2011	398,736	1,767	173,503	3,421	221,812	151,640	70,172	55.63
2012	378,751	1,853	178,998	3,253	196,500	138,881	57,619	51.88
2013	368,103	1,933	177,195	3,297	187,534	129,508	58,026	50.95

\* Sp Schools=Special schools

\*\* Sp Classes=Special classes in regular schools

\*\*\* Reg Classes= Regular classes in regular schools

Note: The data of 1949-1987 are extracted from Yang and Wang (1994). The data of 1997-2013 is extracted from MoE's annual reports. The data of 'Students in Reg Classes' of 1997-2000 also include the students in special classes in regular schools. The data of 'Sp Schools' before 2004 only include 3 types of special schools which accommodate children with visual impairments, hearing/speech impairments and intellectual impairments. The data of the disabled students before 2007 only refer to 3 categories of disabilities: visual impairments, hearing/speech impairments and intellectual impairments. The data represent primary and junior secondary education at compulsory level.

## Appendix-B: Summary of methods for researching children's views

Method	Description	Advantages	Limitations
Questionnaires	Children are asked to fill in pre-designed questionnaires regarding their experiences or opinions. They could agree/disagree or rate to what extent they identify with the statements. The questionnaires could be in postal or online forms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cost-efficient for a large sample of participants</li> <li>- Could access children across regions</li> <li>- Can be facilitated by simple language or symbols (Georgeson, 2012)</li> <li>- Collecting direct and structured information about research focus (Mahbub, 2008)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of depth and miss out real-life complexity</li> <li>- Adults might impose their views when assisting children to complete the task (Woolfson et al., 2007)</li> <li>- Constraining diversity of responses</li> <li>- Hard to be personalised</li> <li>- Abstract and disengaging</li> </ul>
Interview	Interview is widely used to learn about children's views and experiences. In spite of traditional ways of interviewing, it is also common to use prompts such as pictures. Puppets or the strategy of role-playing are also often used especially with young children.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Likely to gain rich data through face-to-face interaction</li> <li>- Structured or semi-structured interviews could help gain direct information on research focus</li> <li>- Space is open for children's individual responses</li> <li>- Individual interview provides privacy for sensitive issues, and can be better personalised</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mainly rely on children's verbal competency which could be unsuitable for some (Gibson, 2012)</li> <li>- Challenges for interpretation (Lewis &amp; Porter, 2004)</li> <li>- Need to balance power relations</li> <li>- Interpreters might be needed (Harr, 2001)</li> <li>- Time-consuming</li> </ul>
Focus group	In focus group discussion, researchers act as facilitators while leaving the discussion to children around research topics.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Children might feel empowered by outnumbering adults</li> <li>- Children could stimulate each other's thoughts, and jointly construct responses (Snelgrove, 2005)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Information gathered might be less relevant</li> <li>- Some children might be subject to group pressure to give desirable responses or become marginalised</li> <li>- Little space for children to discuss their personal issues</li> <li>- More articulate children might dominate the discussion (Woolfson et al., 2007)</li> </ul>
Observation	Observation could take place in various forms depending on to what extent a researcher is participating in children's lives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Less intrusive</li> <li>- Effectively complement other methods</li> <li>- Understand meanings in children's everyday behaviours and interactions</li> <li>- Build rapport and make children feel relaxed in informal interactions</li> <li>- Suitable to research children with profound or multiple learning difficulties (Ware, 2004)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Might risk misinterpreting children's meanings and intentions (Ware, 2004)</li> <li>- Usually need to gain consent from other stakeholders or institutions</li> </ul>
Photography	Photography has gained its popularity in researching children's worlds. It can take the form as 'photovoice', during which children take photos independently to capture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Accessible, fun, engaging and interactive (Stevens, 2010)</li> <li>- Children act as their agents in child-led activities to be in charge of how they represent themselves (Booth &amp; Booth, 2003)</li> <li>- Facilitate communication in</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Complex ethical issues such as confidentiality (Aldridge, 2012)</li> <li>- Subject to institutional regulations and gatekeepers' acceptance (Wickenden &amp; Kembhavi-Tam, 2014)</li> <li>- Photos taken by children might</li> </ul>

	and represent their everyday experiences. In photo-elicitation research, participants review and make sense of the photos either taken by themselves or researchers.	interviews (O'Brien, 2013) and stimulate reflection (Miles & Kaplan, 2005) - Support recalling of details of events, people, places and feelings - Inclusive to participants who lack verbal skills (Booth & Booth, 2003; Nind, 2008)	not be relevant to research focus - Children might be worried about their photography skills (Baker & Weller, 2003) - Children could be more interested in the idea of photography itself than taking photos representing their experiences (Linklater, 2006)
Guided tours	Children are invited to take researchers on a tour around the settings where they are studying or living. Photos or videos might be taken to document the tour.	- Positioning children as the knowers and gatekeepers which effectively balances power relations - Fun, engaging and help build rapport - Could carry out observation and interview during the process	- Children might not offer information on research focus
Drawing	Children are given topics to draw people, events or places. Follow-up interview is often needed to seek children's rationale of their drawings.	- An activity that children are familiar with - Children's works can be creative, emotionally rich and revealing - Visual illustrations to show children's worlds (Punch, 2002) - Suitable for children with learning difficulties by focusing children's attention on specific events (Porter, 2009) - Less cognitively demanding than photography (Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014)	- Children may feel nervous about their artistic competence (Punch, 2002) - Children may simply copy other people's work - Not necessarily a fun activity for every child (Wickenden & Kembhavi-Tam, 2014)
Talking Mats	Talking Mats is a symbol system, which supports children with learning disabilities to demonstrate their preferences and opinions over decision-making by arranging pictures, photos or symbols.	- Significantly increased accessibility to participants with severe intellectual impairments (Nind, 2008) - Easy for children to understand	- Might restrict children's responses given limited materials - Need to prepare materials or purchase existing symbols which are based on western schooling contexts - Children may try to please adults when making choices (Georgeson et al., 2014)
Good/bad things about school	Children list good or bad things in their eyes to help identify the facilitators and barriers to their schooling.	- Straightforward and clearly focused - Offer structure to elicit children's views	- Children's responses might be limited thus need follow-up interviews
Message in a bottle/Magic wand	Children are asked to imagine what they want to change about their lives such as provision at school.	- Collect direct data on children's aspirations for improvement	- It requires children's understanding of the concept. - Might not be familiar to children from different cultural backgrounds
Diary	Children keep records of their experiences of daily lives.	- Allow children to freely keep notes of their personal feelings - Could be productive in providing large amount of quality data (Barker & Weller, 2003)	- The diaries could be out of research focus (Barker & Weller, 2003) - Children might lose interest in being committed to write diaries

## Appendix-C: Pilot study

Before commencing the formal study, I conducted a pilot study for two weeks in another school, called Bridge School. The main purpose of the pilot study was to try out different methods, familiarise myself with school lives, gain insights into potential challenges of conducting the formal study, and have a clearer idea about what data would be available and relevant to my inquiry (Foster, 1996). I was introduced to the school by the director Mr Liang, and the resource teacher met me on my first visit to the school. She told me that she was too busy with her responsibility for school management to do very much as a resource teacher. Only two female LRC pupils with mild learning difficulties were studying in the school. Two other children, who had autism, had just been transferred to the special school to receive more intensive behavioural interventions.

Difficulties in securing children's participation were soon encountered. Teachers believed that one of the two LRC pupils, Ku, would not be able to participate but I insisted that I would like to try with both of them. Then, although both girls would have loved to take part, Nu's parents later decided to withdraw her because they were worried about confidentiality, which reminded me of parents' concerns about research ethics. Finally I was able to recruit Ku, Ku's class teacher and Nu's class teacher as participants.

I observed lessons and activities that Ku attended and took photos when necessary. I invited her to take me on a photographic guided tour of the campus to show me places she liked or disliked. Then three individual interview sessions with her were conducted. On request, she looked at some selected photos on my laptop and told me about what happened in the place depicted. I also asked if she could draw herself and her class teacher. The findings from the pilot study were also rich and informative, sharing similar patterns with the formal study, but they were not to be presented in this thesis.

To review the methods, I found that the guided tour turned out to be more than just a useful activity for building rapport with children. It in fact provided opportunities for children to lead the talks and invite me into their worlds. Thus I decided to keep this method and shift it to a more important position in my formal study. Children's comments during the tour were recorded or written into the fieldnotes as part of the research data.

During the pilot study, the photos I took captured many 'significant' moments. For example, in a group photo of one PE lesson, it could be seen that Ku was left alone and children were keeping their distance from her. Although such photos were revealing and appalling in themselves, and tended to effectively trigger children's memories of these events, seeing parents' deep concern over whether the photos would be shown to other people and put their children in an unfavourable light as a result, I reflected on which photos could be counted as ethically appropriate. I decided to be more cautious about when and where to take photos in my formal study, which inevitably made the photos taken lean more towards positive images of children or mundane scenes of school life. Children's responses were also influenced by the adjustment. Compared to the pilot study, during which Ku had a strong

emotional reaction to the photos showing her 'in' or 'out' of the class community, the child participants in the formal study were somehow calmer about the photos presented. I chose to ask children about certain significant events that I did not capture in the photos. In addition, drawing was taken out although it had worked quite well for Ku because she liked drawing a lot. However, not every child liked drawing (Punch, 2002) and children might be simply replicating existing images from textbooks or other children's works.

## Appendix-D: Informed consent letters

### Consent letter for children

#### **My school. My life.**

Hi,

My name is Yuchen and I am studying for my doctoral degree in the UK.

I really like to know what your school life is like and how you think about it.



We can go on a tour and take photos of the places that are important to you.

It will be a lot of fun!

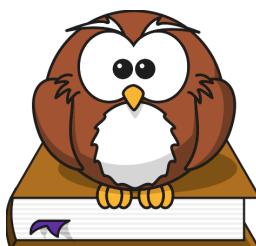


I also want to take photos of what you do everyday in the school.

Then we can have a look at the photos together.



I will write your story into my book.



I will not tell your teachers, your parents or other pupils what you say.

But to stop someone from being hurt, I may have to talk to others for help.



You could ask to stop at any time.



You can decide whether to take part. This is not schoolwork.



If you have any questions, you can talk to me or your class teacher at any time.



If you want to join in, please write down your name and return the form to me.

I would like to be part in the project.

- I understand that I can ask to stop at any time.
- I agree to audio/video recording of me.



- I understand that what I say will remain secret unless someone is being hurt.
- I understand that no one will recognise me in the book.

My name: \_\_\_\_\_



## Consent letter for LRC pupils' parents

Dear parent,

My name is Yuchen Wang and I am a PhD candidate in the Moray House School of Education in the University of Edinburgh, funded by the China Scholarship Council. I am doing my doctoral research to examine LRC pupils' participation in regular schools in Shanghai. I hope this research will help regular schools improve the practice of LRC. I would really appreciate your help by supporting your child to participate in this research.

I would like to observe and take some photos of your child's everyday school life including lessons and activities. By viewing these photos, I will talk with him/her to know about what s/he thinks about schooling. I will also invite your child to take me to photograph the places around the campus that are important to him/her.

I need to record the interview so I could remember what your child has told me because I need to write my reports on that. All the interviews and photos are confidential and the only people I may share them with are my supervisors. No photo that includes your child will be made public. The real name of your child will be replaced by a pseudonym in reports.

Please check with your child if s/he is willing to meet me. If you would like your child to take part in this research, please sign your name on the consent form and return it to school in time.

If you want to know more about the research, you could contact me by calling xxx or emailing xxx at any time.

Many thanks for your support.

Yours sincerely

Yuchen Wang

-----  
I am happy to let my child take part in this research.

- I understand that my child can leave the research at any time and s/he does not have to answer the researcher's questions during the interview.
- I agree that the interview can be recorded.
- I allow the researcher to take photos of lessons and activities that includes my child.
- I understand that no photo that includes my child will be made public.
- I understand that the interview and the photos will be confidential.

- I understand that my child will not be identified in reports.
- I understand that confidentiality may be breached when information about child abuse or neglect is revealed.

Child's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## Consent letter for headteachers

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Yuchen Wang and I am a PhD candidate in the Moray House School of Education in the University of Edinburgh, funded by the China Scholarship Council. I am doing my doctoral research to examine LRC pupils' participation in regular schools in Shanghai. I hope this research will help regular schools improve the practice of LRC. I would really appreciate your help by allowing me to conduct the research in your school.

This research is expected to last from now till the end of the fall semester, January 2014. I will pay visits to the school to carry out research activities including observing LRC pupils' everyday school life, and interviewing them and their class teachers. I need to take some photos of the school's lessons, activities and places for research purpose, however, no photo with identifiable individuals will be published. The school's name will be replaced by a pseudonym in reports.

If you agree to let me conduct the research in the school, please sign your name on the consent form and return it to me.

If you want to know more about the research, you could contact me by calling xxx or emailing xxx at any time.

Many thanks for your support.

Yours sincerely

Yuchen Wang

-----  
I agree to let the researcher conduct the research in my school.

- I understand that my school could stop participating in this research at any stage.
- I allow the researcher to take photos of the school's lessons, activities and places.
- I understand that no photo that includes identifiable individuals will be published.
- I understand that my school will not be identified in reports.
- I understand that confidentiality may be breached when information about child abuse or neglect is revealed.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## Consent letter for teachers

Dear teacher,

My name is Yuchen Wang and I am a PhD candidate in the Moray House School of Education in the University of Edinburgh, funded by the China Scholarship Council. I am doing my doctoral research to examine LRC pupils' participation in regular schools in Shanghai. I hope this research will help regular schools improve the practice of LRC. I would be really grateful if you could participate in this research.

I intend to observe and take some photos of your class including lessons and activities. The photos will be used as prompts to interview children and no photo that includes identifiable individuals will be published. I would like to interview you to know more about the schooling practice towards LRC pupils. If you agree, I will record the interview because I need to write reports on that. The interview and the photos will be confidential and the only people I may share them with are my supervisors. Your name will be replaced by a pseudonym in reports.

If you would like to participate in this research, please sign your name on the consent form and return it to me.

If you want to know more about the research, you could contact me by calling xxx or emailing xxx at any time.

Many thanks for your support.

Yours sincerely

Yuchen Wang

-----  
I would like to participate in this research.

- I understand that I could leave the research at any point and I do not have to answer the researcher's questions during the interview.
- I agree that the interview can be recorded.
- I allow the researcher to take photos of lessons and activities in my class.
- I understand that no photo that includes identifiable individuals will be published.
- I understand that the interview and the photos will be confidential.
- I understand that I will not be identified in reports.
- I understand that confidentiality may be breached when information about child abuse or neglect is revealed.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## Consent letter for other parents

Dear parent,

My name is Yuchen Wang and I am a PhD candidate in the Moray House School of Education in the University of Edinburgh, funded by the China Scholarship Council. I am planning to carry out an educational research in the school and the head teacher is willing to cooperate with my research.

Your child is not directly involved in this research. I only intend to observe and take photos of the lessons and activities of the whole class. The photos are used for research purpose and no photo that includes your child will be made public. The photos will be confidential and the only people I may share them with are my supervisors.

If you have any further concerns, you could talk to the class teacher or contact me by calling xxx or emailing xxx at any time.

You only need to sign this form and return it to school if you are **not** willing to agree to me taking and using the photos that include your child.

Many thanks for your support.

Yours sincerely

Yuchen Wang

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I am aware that the researcher will observe my child's class.

I **do not** wish the researcher take and use the photos that include my child.

Child's name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent's signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix-E: Introduction to participating schools

School	Description
Mingzhu	<p>Mingzhu School has over 1400 students on the roll and the average class size is 45. The new campus is equipped with ample facilities whereas the playground is still under construction. The neighbourhood is made up mainly of re-located Shanghai citizens and migrants. The school is under pressure to increase its academic performance. There is another high-performing school nearby, which is more attractive to parents. This has put Mingzhu School in an awkward position because it is obliged to admit children who are ‘turned down’ by the other school, such as autistic children. The school’s large intake is said to be beyond its capacity; however, the recently appointed deputy headteacher has a strong commitment to ‘zero rejection’. The school is positioned as an exemplary school for implementing LRC. The resource classroom in the school, which has been open for nearly two years, is also seen as a standard model, and visitors frequently come from different parts of the country to learn about it.</p>
Yulan	<p>Yulan School has around 700 pupils on the roll and the average class size is 33. There has not been much demographic change in its catchment area, characterised by a large population living in poverty. The school buildings and facilities are worn. There was formerly a special classroom for disabled children in the school about 10 years ago. The current headteacher was asked to teach there when she was still a subject teacher. She recalled unpleasant experiences, and claimed that there was no way to teach these children and that no good teacher would want to go there. The headteacher does not personally support the idea of having disabled children in regular classrooms, but she would still favour the implementation of LRC since through designation of these children the academic results of the school could automatically appear better. Within the jurisdiction, Yulan School has the largest number of designated LRC pupils.</p>
Wenyuan	<p>Wenyuan School is located in a deprived neighbourhood, surrounded by residential buildings that urgently require maintenance. The campus, however, is renovated and supplied with essential facilities. It has only around 250 pupils on the roll and the class size varies between 20 and 30. Compared to the other three schools, Wenyuan School is more relaxed about the performance agenda. The headteacher knows each LRC pupil personally and well. She is more worried about other children who have to face increasing pressure over their academic learning. She rejects the creation of huge differences between teachers’ performance-related bonuses. The resource classroom is there but is not used regularly.</p>

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Hongxing

Hongxing School is similar to Mingzhu School in many respects. It is also a big school with over 1000 pupils on the roll and places a strong emphasis on children's academic performance. The school has a large intake of migrant children and struggles with discipline problems. It has recently moved to its new campus which is equipped with advanced facilities. However, the school buildings are still not designed to be accessible (e.g. no elevator for wheelchair users). There are many pupils who are facing exclusion from the school for various reasons. With the opening of the resource classroom, many teachers now tend to send 'special' children to the resource teacher for consultation and intervention.

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## Appendix-F: Overview of participants

### Mingzhu School

#### Pupil 1 - Sha

Sha is 10 years old, in her 4<sup>th</sup> Year, and identified as having Mild Learning Difficulties. She is outgoing and polite and likes sharing her feelings. She is described by teachers as a beautiful, kind-hearted girl, but one who is spoiled by her middle-class parents. Her mother is not local, and is thus blamed by her father's family for giving birth to a disabled child. She is close to her parents and has been well looked after. Her parents take her to weekend tutoring in her favourite subject – English. She also has an older sister in another class in the same school, but it seems that they do not see each other during the day. Unfair practice towards girls upsets her. She likes studying. She often puts up her hand to answer teachers' questions. She also likes taking part in activities with other pupils and is eager to contribute to the community. She has very few friends at school. She plays with two other girls who are also identified as having intellectual impairments. She is often teased by children in her class, who find her voice funny and who also laugh when she fails to answer teachers' questions correctly. She enjoys playing in the resource classroom, but finds it unhelpful for learning. When she leaves the regular classroom, she tries to conceal her destination from other children.

#### Class teacher 1 - Ms Ding

Ms Ding has been working as a teacher for over 25 years. She teaches Chinese and also leads the school's 'lesson study' group on the subject. She has no experience of LRC or special education training. She is very confident and proud of her teaching and, with so many years' experience, she feels that she knows how to engage every child in learning. She took over the class from the beginning of the semester with the intention of setting it right, because its academic performance was falling far behind the average. She supports the opening of the resource classroom because she feels that it is too stressful for LRC pupils to stay in regular classrooms all the time, struggling with the high curriculum standards. She is fine with having LRC pupils in her class; however, she is not happy about the presence of a child who is identified as having severe learning difficulties but whose family rejected the designation. She is losing the performance-related bonus because this child's exam results still count. She feels that her excellence and expertise in teaching are thus not acknowledged anymore.

#### Pupil 2 - Qi

Qi is 10 years old, in his 3<sup>rd</sup> Year, and identified as having Moderate Learning Difficulties. He likes expressing his thoughts and opinions. His father is described by teachers as also having intellectual impairments. Qi is aware that his family lives in poverty. His mother is the main carer and Qi is very close to her. They do things together and he wants to share everything with her. However, the class teacher, Ms Xia, feels that his mother only wants the financial benefits accruing from the designation, and that she has been avoiding teachers. Qi is seated at the back corner of the classroom though he is not at all tall. He takes part in learning the subjects he

likes. At other times, he usually looks out the window. He doesn't like Ms Xia. He plays with two other boys at school during breaks. He is the only child participant who shows tremendous fondness for the resource classroom. He is famous in the school for being called 'Mr Pacifier' because he used to put his thumb in his mouth. But he prefers to call himself 'Big Bear'.

#### Class teacher 2 - Ms Xia

Ms Xia has been a teacher for more than 5 years and has been with Qi's class throughout. She teaches English and is now expecting a baby. She often criticises children in her class, because she believes that in order to have good discipline, children have to be afraid of their teachers. She was formerly an assistant in a research project investigating teachers' attitudes towards LRC. Through this, she learned about the medical and psychological aspects of disability. She argues that disabled children should not be enrolled in regular schools because they will only be discriminated against by other children due to their differences. Her relationship with Qi is not going well. They don't like each other and there is much tension between her and Qi's parents. For example, she chooses to discipline Qi by punishing the parents for his faults. She has experienced a subtle change in her perceptions since becoming pregnant, and has begun to understand the challenges involved in raising a child.

#### Resource teacher 1 - Ms Zhang

Ms Zhang is an experienced teacher of Chinese. She has been a teacher for more than 20 years. She is friendly, energetic and socially wise, seems to know everyone at school and can communicate with different people, ranging from teachers and headteachers to policy-makers. She was asked to take the post of resource teacher mostly because of her ability to coordinate colleagues' activities. She welcomed the decision because it seemed that it might also benefit her professional career. She is now undergoing training for resource teachers, but feels that the theories she learns about are not helpful for solving real-life problems. She still spends numerous hours each week teaching Chinese, and so admits that she cannot be fully committed to the job. In spite of this, she has been trying out different ways of running the resource classroom. She is kind, compassionate and respectful towards the children who come to her resource classroom, and is thus well liked by them in return.

### **Yulan School**

#### Pupil 3 - Ting

Ting is 9 years old, in her 2<sup>nd</sup> Year, and identified as having Moderate Learning Difficulties. Teachers describe her as a cute, sweet and well-behaved girl. She likes looking at people curiously and often wears a smile on her face. Sometimes she does extremely well in exams, which greatly surprises teachers. It is said that her family has devoted much effort to helping with her academic learning. However, teachers are concerned that she is spending too much time finishing homework (she stays up late every day and also studies at weekends) rather than having a good time during her childhood. Teachers feel that she seriously lacks skills in communicating and

socialising with people. Ting seems to have no friends at school. She likes her class teacher, Ms Cui, and the resource teacher, Ms Zhao, a lot.

#### Class teacher 3 - Ms Cui

Ms. Cui has worked as a teacher for nearly 15 years, and has been with Ting from Year 1. She teaches Chinese and is fairly patient and caring towards pupils. She has no training related to LRC or special education. She personally opposes categorising children for any reason. She says that she owes a lot to Ting's family for supporting the child's learning. Thus she feels all the more obliged to keep Ting safe and happy at school, and would experience guilt if ever she failed to do so. She also rewards Ting, by, for example, positioning her as a behavioural model for other pupils to learn from. She hopes that Ting can pick up social skills, which will be essential for her independent living when she grows up.

#### Pupil 4 - Li

Li is 9 years old, in her 4<sup>th</sup> Year, and identified as having Mild Learning Difficulties. Li seems to be shy and quiet most of the time. Her parents have divorced and she is living with her father since 'my mom does not want me anymore'. Her favourite time is that spent with her father: he buys her new clothes, takes her to the park and plays games, like badminton, with her. Teachers don't understand why Li is unable to perform at the same level as other pupils with Mild Learning Difficulties. Her condition seems to be getting worse. She often stands apart from the crowd and withdraws from classroom learning, claiming that she can do nothing. She has no friends at school, and sometimes is bullied by the peer supporters assigned by teachers. She does not like going to the resource classroom and often 'forgets' about the timetable.

#### Class teacher 4 - Ms Ruan

Ms Ruan has been a teacher for almost 20 years. She has been the class teacher for Li from Year 1. She teaches Chinese and has received no training in LRC or special education. She was formerly one of the teachers who taught at the special class in the school, and that experience led her to believe that teachers should at least not overlook disabled children in terms of their daily lives, even if they can help little with their academic learning. Similarly to Ms Cui, she emphasises caring and the importance of building up a warm class community. After the designation, she somehow gave up on Li's academic learning and now also stops her from participating in school-wide activities. Meanwhile, she ensures that Li can still do some trivial things such as helping teachers to hand out workbooks, or cleaning the classroom, and thus gain a sense of belonging to the class community. She asks some pupils to help Li out. Although Li has complained about being bullied by these pupils, Ms Ruan tends to believe other children's accounts more and comments that Li has just been too sensitive about these issues.

#### Pupil 5 - Xin

Xin is 11 years old, in her 4<sup>th</sup> Year, and identified as having Mild Learning Difficulties. She has lived with her mother since her parents divorced. She is lively

and active. She has a group of good friends in the class, including girls and boys. The most enjoyable thing for her at school is to play and chat with friends, and she likes lessons/activities in which pupils can learn together and support each other. She wants to do better in exams by working harder, but feels that what is being taught has become too difficult for her. Sometimes she might be involved in bullying, but when she turned to the class teacher Ms Jia for help, it was usually settled effectively. She lies to her friends about going the resource classroom because she does not want them to know.

#### Class teacher 5 - Ms Jia

Ms Jia has been a teacher for over 15 years and has been the class teacher for Xin from the beginning. She teaches Chinese and also leads the school's 'lesson study' group on Morals and Society. She has no training in relation to LRC or special education. For a while, she was asked to lead the 'lesson study' group on LRC, but she said that nothing really happened. She is fair, approachable and open to pupils, and well liked by them. She tries to leave as much responsibility as possible to pupils in terms of learning and supporting each other. She said that it was the headteacher's idea to have Xin designated, though other teachers did not acknowledge the need. She is also not sure whether Xin really needs to go to the resource classroom. Her principle is that resource lessons should not take up any time needed for core subjects, and so she wants to prevent Xin's being left too far behind in her academic learning.

#### Resource teacher 2 - Ms Zhao

Ms Zhao has been a teacher for 20 years. She teaches Chinese and also has experience of being a class teacher. She is new to the post of resource teacher. She had to take time off for personal reasons, and after her return the headteacher asked her to take up the job. She has been moved to an office on the ground floor shared with a librarian, and the room is cold and dark during winter. Ms Zhao accepts her situation and makes an effort to help with the learning of the children who come to the resource classroom. She is well received by these children for being attentive and supportive. She feels that now she has come to understand these children better and genuinely wants to do more for them. She has not yet been recruited for resource teacher training.

### **Wenyuan School**

#### Pupil 6 - Dan

Dan is 11 years old, in her final year, and identified as having Mild Learning Difficulties. She always looks positive and is quite articulate when expressing her ideas. She takes part in learning and also socialises with her classmates. She is one of the main organisers and leaders of their 'secret group'. She names all the girls in the class as her friends, and Lulu and another male LRC pupil as her best friends. However, she is pressured by other girls to alienate Lulu. She still tries to protect Lulu's feelings when the latter is marginalised in the class, and intervenes when Lulu is bullied. She enjoys her school life a lot and wishes that everyone could realise

their dreams when they grow up. Indeed, the whole class has agreed that they will come back to the school for a reunion after 10 years.

#### **Pupil 7 - Lulu**

Lulu is approaching 12 years of age, is also in her final year, and is identified as having Mild Learning Difficulties. She is talkative and likes sharing her feelings and thoughts. She is less engaged with learning and also seems to be less interested in socialising with classmates. She does enjoy playing with her best friends – Dan and another male LRC pupil. She is seated at the back of the classroom with no deskmate; however, she says that most pupils like to help with her schoolwork when she needs it. She is very close to her family, especially her mother. Being aware of her parents' low income, she also tries to save on her own expenses. She can be distracted by what's happening in the large family and she tends to conform to her mother's expectations, which may stop her from participating in learning or activities.

#### **Class teacher 6 - Ms Shen**

Ms Shen is an experienced Chinese teacher with over 20 years in the job. She is confident in her teaching and dedicated to children's academic learning. She has high expectations for every child and believes that teachers should help children achieve their potential to the utmost. With 4 LRC pupils out of 19 in the class, she does not feel that there is any extra burden on her workload. She claims that she has learned a lot from this particular class, in which children tend to support each other and contribute to the community without being asked by teachers. She negotiates with the school so that all her LRC pupils do not have to go to the resource classroom. She feels that the key to making things easier is to have a good relationship with pupils, while continuing to reflect on and improve her own practice. However, she favours the idea of categorising children according to their abilities and has doubts about having children with more severe disabilities in regular classrooms.

### **Hongxing School**

#### **Pupil 8 - Ning**

Ning is 11 years old, in her final year, and identified as having Mild Learning Difficulties. She appears to be shy in public but could be quite chatty in private. During breaks, she chats with some girls whom she nominates as her friends, although sometimes she might be left alone. She has a good relationship with her class teacher, Ms Ai, but does not like her English teacher much because she knows that the teacher has low expectations of her. She also feels that the peer supporters assigned by teachers are not always helpful. She is very good at sports and wants to participate in more competitions. However, so far she has only attended events that were specifically provided for LRC pupils. She also tends to be prevented from taking part in extracurricular activities if she fails to pass the exams. She likes all kinds of handcraft work, but had to drop out of the knitting club because of having to go to the resource classroom at the time it was held.

#### Class teacher 7 - Ms Ai

Ms Ai has worked as a Chinese teacher for 20 years and leads the school's 'lesson study' group on Morals and Society. She also works as a committee member for the teachers' Labor Union. She has no previous training in LRC or special education. She has been Ning's class teacher from Year 1. She feels that the designation has enabled Ning to feel less academic pressure, which is good for the girl's emotional wellbeing. She worries a lot about labelling effects and stays sensitive to the management of different treatments. She is somewhat opposed to the idea of the resource classroom and tries to negotiate with Ms Guan about Ning's attendance. She feels close to Ning after many years of being together. She struggles the most with the school's increasing demand to enhance children's academic performance. She has sacrificed her family life to work extra hours in order to meet these demands.

#### Pupil 9 - Wu

Wu is 10 years old, in his 4<sup>th</sup> Year, and identified as having Moderate Learning Difficulties. He is usually quiet and does not talk much. It is said by teachers that at first he refused to speak at all and was given the nickname of 'mute cicada' by the headteacher. After he was referred to Ms Guan, she found out that at home his grandma tended to speak on his behalf. The school has convinced the family that they should adjust their educational approach. Consequently, since the start of this term, he is beginning to open up more. Wu has no friends in the class, and often sits on his chair alone during breaks. His favourite subjects are PE, Natural Science and Craft Skills. In these lessons, he pays great attention to what teachers are saying and actively gets his hands on the learning tasks.

#### Class teacher 8 - Ms Qian

Ms Qian works as a Chinese teacher through a volunteering programme. After getting a Master's degree, she has now been pursuing her career for over a year. She became Wu's class teacher this semester. The English teacher for the class, who is much older and has more years of experience, is her mentor. Thus, although she is the class teacher, the English teacher also has a say in how to manage the class. She has no training in LRC or special education, and often consults Ms Guan about the issues she has encountered. Ms Qian feels that LRC pupils should be viewed in the same light as other children, and that their academic performances should not be excluded from teachers' assessments. Ms Qian comments that she and Wu have a more genuine teacher-student relationship because the communication is not solely for the purpose of improving academic performance. She thinks that the resource classroom is helpful for teaching children practical living skills.

#### Pupil 10 - Rui

Rui is 9 years old, in his 2<sup>nd</sup> Year, and identified as having Mild Learning Difficulties. He likes coming to school and playing with other children for fun. He manages to keep up with the curriculum, and hence teachers feel that he does not have to be designated. He wants to change his seat because he is now placed in the 'special line' with other children who are being punished for their conduct. The difficult aspect of his school life is that he is often bullied in games and finds it hard

to change his role as a 'victim'. Another challenge for him is that he is often sick and has to skip school now and then to get treatment. He does not like leaving the classroom to go to the resource classroom, because there are more interesting things happening back in the regular classroom.

#### Class teacher 9 - Ms Dai

Ms Dai has been a teacher for 5 years and is new to the school. She teaches English and has no training in LRC or special education. She does not understand why Rui manages to do well in exams, and so is thinking about advising the family to have him re-do the tests. She feels that only children with more severe disabilities should be designated. Apart from his learning, she still stops Rui from taking part in school-wide competitions, to enhance the reputation of the class as a whole. She chose Rui's current seat to prevent him interrupting other children's learning, having learned from other teachers this strategy for managing parents' complaints. She tries to intervene with the bullying game but her efforts seem to be ineffective. She is worried that Ms Guan's frequent visits to the classroom to talk to Rui may make other children aware of his difference.

#### Pupil 11 - Lian

Lian is 10 years old, in her 3<sup>rd</sup> Year, and identified as having Severe Learning Difficulties. Her parents are divorced and she lives with her mother. She is said to be well cared for by the mother and her good manners are praised by teachers. She likes joining group activities with everyone else. She struggles with her exam results, especially in Maths. She feels that the Maths teacher helps little, apart from having given her a workbook for pupils in Year 1. She finds it hard to finish homework on her own and her mother often needs to help her. She likes her class teacher, Ms Jun, a lot because of her mild temper. She has no friends in the class and is often bullied by other children. And she hopes the whole class could live together in a peaceful way without fighting with each other. She likes going to the resource classroom because the teaching activities there seem more like playing to her.

#### Class teacher 10 - Ms Jun

Ms. Jun has worked as a teacher for 15 years, teaching Chinese. She also has no training in LRC or special education. With the designation of Lian, the 'all pass' could be ensured for the class, which has benefitted her and other teachers. She is thankful to the family for supporting the child well. Ms Jun considers that the whole class has been tolerant and that pupils see Lian as one of them. She is aware that there have been peer supporters involved in bullying. When there are conflicts, she usually criticises the other children. Ms Jun emphasises that it is important to be patient because Lian is like a little snail, so that teachers should celebrate every little bit of progress that the child has made. She calls Lian 'Lianlian' as a nickname, to make the child feel close to her. She feels that Ms Guan has been helpful and that Lian also greatly enjoys going to the resource classroom.

### Resource teacher 3 - Ms Guan

Ms. Guan has been a Chinese teacher for nearly 30 years. She used to work in a senior management position in the school before stepping down to take up the role of resource teacher. She asked to do this job. She disagreed with the school's sole emphasis on pupils' academic performances at the expense of other things important to a child's growing up. She is very proactive about the agenda of including everyone in the school. She has helped to secure the right to stay for many children who were at risk of being excluded from the school for disciplinary issues. She is now undergoing training as a resource teacher and also plans to get a qualification in counselling, which she feels is more interesting. She devises particular teaching activities for LRC pupils and also meets teachers and parents frequently to provide guidance on their approach. She believes that LRC pupils can only have a better education in her resource classroom and she aims to develop a community for these children, especially those who are marginalised in their own regular classrooms. There is obvious tension between her and regular teachers. She feels that it is wrong for teachers not to cooperate with her. Meanwhile, she seems to have overlooked the potential negative labelling effects on LRC pupils generated by her practice.



## Appendix-G: Interview guidelines

### **Interview guidelines with children**

Children were asked to arrange the photos into three categories representing things that are good/bad/not sure about school. I asked children about their rationale of arranging the photos. The questions could be:

Could you let me know why you put this photo as the best thing about school?

What is so good about this lesson?

What is happening in the photo?

What are you doing? What are other pupils doing?

What makes you dislike this photo?

I will also try to grab the opportunities to probe with relevant questions. For example, if the child starts to talk about his/her relationship with other pupils, I may continue with the topic rather than leaving it to a later stage.

The interview is tended to cover the following topics:

How old are you now?

May you tell me what do you do on a school day?

What would you like to do when you grow up?

Do you attend all the lessons on the timetable?

You may go to the resource classroom sometimes. Do you like it? What do you do there? How does it help you? How could it be better?

Which club are you in? Who chooses it?

What events have you attended? (e.g. singing/sport games) May you tell me about an event that you remember well? Has there been any event you could not attend though you wanted to? Why?

What trips have you joined? (e.g. excursion/field trip) May you tell me about a trip that you remember well? Has there been any trip you could not join though you wanted to? Why?

What do you do for your class? (e.g. cleaning/collecting and distributing homework/being a student cadre) Has there been any work you could not do though you wanted to? Why?

What lessons do you like/dislike?

Is it easy or hard to understand the lessons?

What can make you learn better? What makes learning difficult for you?

Who can help you with your learning?

What do you think about your homework? How about the exams?

What things do you have a say over in the school?

Where do you sit in the classroom? How is the seat? Who are sitting around you?  
What do you do together?

Who do you like best in the teachers? What things does s/he do that you like? How about other teachers?

Have teachers done anything you don't like so much?

What do you do during lesson breaks? Who do you play with?

Have pupils done anything that you don't like so much? What do teachers do when these things happen?

When you have trouble, whom do you turn to?

In order to make your life better in the school, how do you want the school to change?

### **Interview guidelines with class teachers**

How long have you been working in this school? What have you been responsible for? What are you responsible for now?

Have you met LRC pupils in your previous teaching? Could you tell me about your experience?

Have you attended relevant training on LRC or special education before?

May you tell me how it is like when you first meet xxx?

How is s/he designated as a LRC pupil? How does the designation influence your practice?

How would you describe xxx as a pupil?

From your view, what are the educational purposes for LRC pupils who have learning disabilities?

How is xxx enrolled into this school? How is xxx allocated into the class?

Should children with learning disabilities receive compulsory education in regular schools?

Does xxx have any different curriculums compared to other pupils?

Do you know what xxx is doing in the resource classroom? Do you think the resource teacher understand xxx's learning needs? What role should the resource

classroom play in the school? What do you think about the fact that xxx may have to skip other lessons if s/he goes to the resource classroom?

How is xxx doing in terms of attending school events/trips?

Does xxx have chances to do things for the class?

Why do you let xxx sit on the current seat?

How do you promote xxx's participation in learning?

Does xxx have the same homework with other pupils? How about the exams?

Some teachers may consult students about teaching practices, have you ever tried to do this before?

How is it going between xxx and other pupils?

As a class teacher, how do you promote xxx's relationship with other pupils?

How is the relationship between xxx and other subject teachers?

What have facilitated the process of promoting xxx's participation in learning and activities? What difficulties need to be solved? What supports do you need?

Would you like to provide some advices for the policy and practice of LRC?

Is there anything important that has not been covered in this interview? What else would you like to share with me?

### **Interview guidelines with resource teachers**

How long have you been working in this school? What have you been responsible for? What are you responsible for now?

How did you become the resource teacher?

Have you ever attended relevant training?

As a resource teacher, what do you need to do exactly?

How would you describe xxx as a pupil?

Should children with learning disabilities receive compulsory education in regular schools?

From your view, what are the educational purposes for LRC pupils who have learning disabilities?

What role should the resource classroom play in the school?

Who should come to the resource classroom to learn? What should be taught here? How is the timetable arranged?

Does it exist any problems or difficulties? What supports do you need?

Would you like to provide some advices for the policy and practice of LRC?

Is there anything important that has not been covered in this interview? What else would you like to share with me?